ALL STORIES NEW...NO REPRINTS

RANCH ROMANCES

5c

A THRILLING PUBLICATION
FIRST MAY NUMBER

FEATURING

THE ANGRY MEN
by Will Cotton

ATAN WEARS A STETSON
by Ray Gaulden

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Bass Fishermen will Say I'm Crazy . . .

until they try my method!

But, after an honest trial, if you're at all like the other men to whom I've told my strange plan, you'll guard it with your last breath.

Don't jump at conclusions. I'm not a manufacturer of any fancy new lure. I have no reels or lines to sell. I'm a professional man and make a good living in my profession. But my all-absorbing hobby is fishing. And, quite by accident, I've discovered how to go to waters that everyone else says are fished out and come in with a limit catch of the biggest bass that you ever saw. The savage old bass that got so big, because they were "wise" to every ordinary way of fishing.

This METHOD is NOT spinning, trolling, casting, fly fishing, trot line fishing, set line fishing, hand line fishing, live bait fishing, jugging, netting, trapping, seining, and does not even faintly resemble any of these standard methods of fishing. No live bait or prepared bait is used. You can carry all of the equipment you need in one hand.

The whole method can be learned in twenty minutes—twenty minutes of fascinating reading. All the extra equipment you need, you can buy locally at a cost of less than a dollar. Yet with it, you can come in after an hour or two of the greatest excitement of your life, with a stringer full. Not one or two miserable 12 or 14 inch over-sized keepers—but five or six real beauties with real poundage behind them. The kind that don't need a word of explanation of the professional skill of the man who caught them. Absolutely legal, too—in every state.

This amazing method was developed by a little group of professional fishermen. Though they are public guides, they rarely divulge their method to their patrons. They use it only when fishing for their own tables. It is probable that no man on your waters has ever **seen it,** ever **heard of it,** or ever **used it.** And when you have given it the first trial, you will be as closed-mouthed as a man who has suddenly discovered a gold mine. Because with this method you can fish within a hundred feet of the best fishermen in the county and pull in ferocious big ones while they come home empty handed. No special skill is required. The method is just as deadly in the hands of a novice as in the hands of an old timer. My method will be disclosed only to those few men in each area who will give me their word of honor not to give the method to anyone else.

Send me your name. Let me tell you how you can try out this deadly method of bringing in big bass from your "fished out" waters. Let me tell you why I let you try out my unusual method for the whole fishing season without risking a penny of your money. Send your name for details of my money-back trial offer. There is no charge for this information, now or at any other time. Just your name is all I need. But I guarantee that the information I send you will make you a complete skeptic—until you decide to try my method! And then, your own catches will fill you with disbelief. Send your name, today. This will be fun.

ERIC K. FARE, Libertyville 8, Illinois

ERIC K. FARE, Libertyville 8, Illinois

Dear Mr. Fare: Send me complete information without any charge and without the slightest obligation. Tell me how I can learn your method of catching big bass from "fished out" waters, even when the old timers are reporting "No Luck."

Name .....

Address .....

City..... Zone... State.....

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32nd Year
OF PUBLICATION

FIRST MAY NUMBER
May 4, 1956
Volume 198, No. 1

RANCH ROMANCES

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HELEN TONO
Editor

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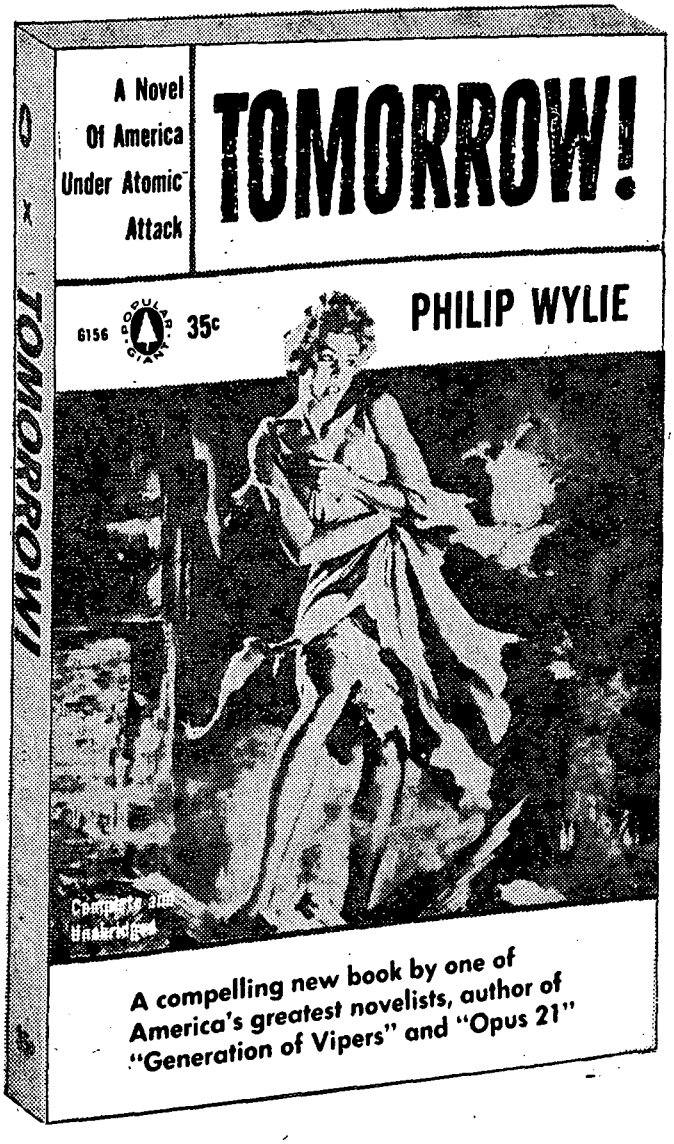
"...pray that this 'TOMORROW!' will never come." — Val Peterson

Federal Civil Defense Administrator

(in The New York Times Book Review)


TOMORROW!
A Novel Of America Under Atomic Attack
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Ranch Dweller

Dear Editor:

I live on a 300-acre ranch where we raise goats and registered white-faced cattle. I love the outdoors and spend a lot of time in the saddle. I am 32 years old, have black hair and brown eyes, stand 5'3" tall and weigh 115 lbs. I like to receive letters, and will exchange snapshots and view cards.

ROSE FINEBERG

General Delivery
Oxnard, California

Reads Our Magazine

Dear Editor:

I have been reading RANCH ROMANCES for 16 years and have enjoyed every copy. I am 36 years old, and have brown hair and hazel eyes. I am a photographer, and will send a picture to any girl that sends hers. So come on and fill my mail box.

BUSTER BULLARD

East Lumberton
North Carolina

The Long and Short of It

Dear Editor:

Here's hoping that your readers can help settle an age-old argument. Who is the most popular, the tall or the short girl? We're inviting you to write to the one that you like better. LaVerne is 5'2½" tall, with red hair and green eyes, and is 23 years old. Evelyn is 5'10" tall, with blond hair and blue eyes, and is 18 years old. We promise to answer all letters.

LAVERNE TALLIS
EVELYN TALLIS

3867A Garfield
St. Louis 13, Missouri

Dutch Seaman

Dear Editor:

I am a Dutch seaman sailing on Norwegian ships, and I read RANCH ROMANCES whenever I can get hold of a copy. I am 25 years of age and would like to correspond with girls between the ages of 18 and 25. Swimming and dancing are my favorite sports. Will try to answer all letters I receive, and will exchange snapshots.

JOHANNES F. VAN OERS

M/T Vibran, Knutsen Line
Haugesund, Norway

Active Teenager

Dear Editor:

I know how much servicemen look forward to getting letters, so I would like to hear from them, especially those of Spanish or Mexican nationality. I am 15 years old, 5' tall, weigh 100 lbs., and have dark brown hair and brown eyes. I like dancing, swimming, and making new friends. I can write very interesting letters, so why not give me a try?

LUPE ZAMORA

P.O. Box 131
Carbondale, Colorado

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 31 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesale spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Promises to be Faithful

Dear Editor:

It is not very often that an Oregonian makes your column, but I am hoping that I may be one of those fortunate ones. I am 27 years old, have blond hair and blue eyes, and am 5'8" tall. I like just about everything, but art and sports are my special interests. I promise to be a faithful correspondent and will exchange photographs.

BILL TAYLOR

Box 716
Madros, Oregon

Small Town Blues

Dear Editor:

I get pretty lonely in my small town, as the only thing to do here is to go to the movies or go dancing. I am 23 years old, have brown hair and blue eyes, am 5'2½" tall, and weigh 175 lbs. Am fond of all kinds of sports, and enjoy music too. Would like to hear from women between the ages of 17 and 35.

THOMAS D. HUFFMAN, JR.

7400 Flower Avenue
Takoma Park 12, Maryland

From Another Land

Dear Editor:

Would you please help me to find a few American pen-friends? I have always wanted to tour America, so I would enjoy learning about your vast, wonderful country. I'm always telling my friends that I'll receive hundreds of answers if my letter gets in the Air Mail column. So won't you all oblige?

MARY SEFTON

119 Peary Road
Mt. Eden, Auckland
New Zealand

Air Force Guy

Dear Editor:

I am in the Air Force and am stationed in California, where I know only a few people. So I'd love to make new acquaintances through letters. I am 29 years old, have blue eyes and dark hair, and stand 5'5" tall. Have had three years of college, and love all sports. Will answer all letters—

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especially those from girls that hail from California or Iowa—and will gladly exchange photographs.

A/2C RALPH E. DOWNS
329th Bomb Sq.
Castle AFB, California

Lonesome Guy

Dear Editor:

Have been reading your magazine for many years but this is my first attempt to enter "Our Air Mail." I am 39 years old, 5'8" tall, weigh 168 lbs. Will promise to answer all letters, and will exchange snapshots too, as my hobby is photography. Would love to hear from the wonderful gals all over the country.

JIMMIE E. KEELING
c/o Failings Service
Baker, California

Country Girl

Dear Editor:

I wonder if some pen pals would write to a country girl who is now living in a big city and is awfully lonesome. I'd love to hear from farmers and ranchers, but dudes will do too. I'm 34 years old, 5'4½" tall, weigh 124 lbs., and have black hair and blue eyes. Really enjoy all outdoor sports. So let me hear from all of you.

MADELINE BECKWITH
3612 Arin Street
Houston, Texas

Dog Lover

Dear Editor:

Would like to have my letter published in "Our Air Mail." My hobby is raising and breeding American (Pit) bull terriers and game cocks (fighting cocks). I am 34 years old, 5'10" tall, weigh 150 lbs., and have brown hair and blue eyes. So come on, all you gals from 16 to 95; I'll exchange snaps with you.

GENE FULKERSON
Route 2
Centertown, Kentucky

Has Interesting Hobby

Dear Editor:

I would like to exchange letters with young ladies between the ages of 25 and 30. My hobby is making things out of leather, including handbags. I also like sports very much. I am 27 years old, 5'8½" tall, and have blue eyes and brown hair. Will exchange snapshots

GEORGE W. FLAGLER
135 Hebard Street
Santa Cruz, California

Likes People

Dear Editor:

I am 24 years old, 5'11" tall, weigh 165 lbs., and have brown hair and blue eyes. I would like to write to people between the ages of 18 and 30. I have diplomas from several Bible Schools. I like life and people, and I hope you'll print my plea for pen pals.

VIC DUNKLEY
3039 E. 91st Street
Box 419
Chicago 17, Illinois

Calling All Drillers

Dear Editor:

I work on a Siesmograph crew as a driller. I would like to hear from drillers in other countries. Would also like to hear from girls between the ages of 16 and 23. I am 5'11" tall, weigh 165 lbs., and have brown hair and blue eyes. Like all kinds of sports, but hard ball is my specialty.

FRANK KRISTEL
Can. Enp. Co. Ltd.
Party #1
Manning, Alta., Canada

Night Worker

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely bachelor who is a night service station attendant. I am 42 years old, 5'8" tall, weigh 160 lbs., and have brown hair and eyes. Would like to correspond with women between the ages of 30 and 40 years old. So come on and write to me, and I will exchange snapshots and postcards of Los Angeles and California.

CHARLES LARIS
1516 West 11th Street
Los Angeles 15, California

Tries Again

Dear Editor:

I tried once before to get into "Our Air Mail" but didn't succeed, probably because you had so many requests. So now I have decided to try again. I'm 18 years old, 5'5½" tall, and weigh 112 lbs. My hair and eyes are brown. Hobbies include reading, writing, and just walking. Would like to hear from boys and girls between the ages of 15 and 25. Will exchange snapshots.

ANN HARRIS
1751 Albion
Burley, Idaho

Sister Act

Dear Editor:

We are two sisters who would like to hear from boys and girls, between the ages of 14 and 21. Joyce is 16 years old, 5'4" tall, and has long brown hair and gray eyes. Jean is 14 years old, 5'1" tall, and has blond hair and blue eyes. We both like all outdoor sports. But pen pals are what we're most interested in at present. Let's hear from all of you.

JOYCE BURNS
JEAN BURNS
Box 52
Tyrone, New Mexico

Looking Toward The Future

Dear Editor:

I am a man of 36, 5'6" tall, weigh 185 lbs., and have dark brown hair and gray eyes. My wife died of cancer following a long illness, and I am now alone with my little girl, seven years old. My job is at a broadcasting station, and I have many interesting things to write about concerning my job. Would love to hear from ladies between the ages of 25 and 40.

HENRY L. OTIS
P. O. Box 623
Gulfport, Mississippi

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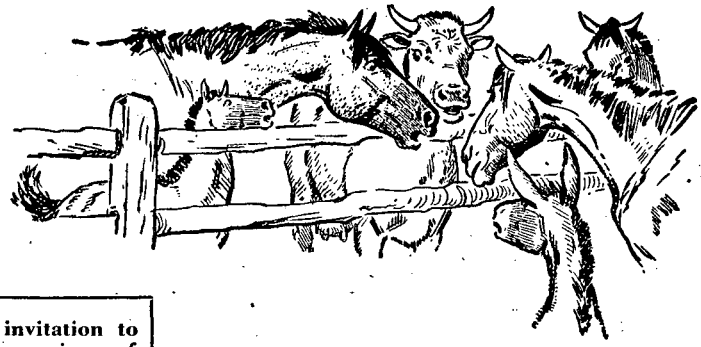
TRAIL DUST



PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found it. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

THE hunting dog belonging to a Boise, Ida., man saved his master's life, but the boss isn't too pleased about it. It was the dog who upset the boat—in which his master was duck hunting—in the first place. Then he rescued nine dead ducks, one by one, before swimming to shore and attracting attention to bring help to his master.

FIREMEN put out a tree fire in Bloomington, Ill., and entered the cause in their record book: "Squirrel smoking in bed."

A CORSICANA, Tex., woman decided to sell her house, and hung a "For Sale" sign on the mail box. She finally took down the sign when she got seven offers to buy the mail box—and none for the house.

WHEN a Pasadena, Calif., woman had her car painted a pale pink, she called the police to ask if she could paint her license plates in a harmonizing color. Told it was against the law, she snapped, "That's ridiculous. I see cars with different-colored plates every day"—and hung up before the policeman could suggest that perhaps the other-colored plates were on out-of-state cars.

THINKING it was her husband, a Houston, Tex., wife called out, "That you, angel?" when she heard a knock on the door. The visitor, a local minister, answered, "No, but I'm from the same department."

EVERYONE reads his press notices these days—even a Tucson, Ariz., burglar who wrote indignantly to the police, "The amount of cash taken from that night-club was $1,897, not $4,000. Will be looking for a correction of this."

WHEN a Des Moines, Ia., schoolboy wrote to a local politician to ask if it were true that candidates don't vote for themselves because it's unethical, the politician replied with unusual candor that not only is it *not* unethical, but he votes for himself every chance he gets.

HOLDUP men were left holding the wrong bag—the one they snatched from a Los Angeles, Calif., bank teller as he stepped from his car. The bag contained the remains of his lunch.

TWENTY-FOUR dirty socks—and one pair of nylons—rewarded a Salem, Ore., state forester's joking remark that it would be easier for the department's bloodhounds to track lost hunters if every hunter sent him a used sock.

OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLA., police arrested a youth for loitering—then got caught loitering themselves. Leaving the boy in the fingerprinting room, the officers forgot about him while they stood chatting among themselves. The youth hasn't been seen since.

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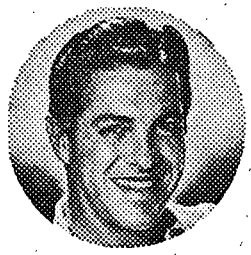
RANCH FLICKER TALK



by movie editor BOB CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

BACKLASH

Universal's new movie is a treat for fans who like their Westerns "straight".... with plenty of excitement and no fancy frills

SEEMS to me that lately I've been seeing a lot of so-called Westerns which are a little off-trail. It appears that the Hollywood studios will call anything a Western if it happens west of New Jersey and has plenty of excitement in it.

But Universal's *Backlash* is a Western, all right—pure, double-distilled horse opera. And if you're the kind of fan who takes his Westerns straight, this is for you.

It's got everything—cowboys, ranchers, longhorns, Indians, outlaws, cowponies and plenty of blazing sixguns. It stars Richard Widmark and Donna Reed, and it was filmed in Technicolor in the actual setting of the story, the Southwest.

On of the biggest ranches in the state, the 26,000 acre Vaca Ranch near Nogales, was one of the main settings. For the picture it was stocked with longhorns, collected from various cattlemen who breed them mostly for nostalgic reasons.

Besides the longhorns, the Universal company found that several other ingredients were needed for *Backlash*. Real working cowboys were used, riding their own horses, and you'll believe it when you see them ride. The Indians in *Backlash*, a few hundred strong, are all members of the Papago tribe, which is native to southern Arizona.

The exciting story starts with an Apache ambush. Five men are found dead on the desert, and a sixth makes an escape. Who the men are, and why one of them got off scot-free, is a mystery. Richard Widmark and Donna Reed are two of the people who try to answer those questions. And both have very good reasons for being curious.

Dick plays a Civil War veteran who is on the trail of his long-missing father. Donna is a quick-on-the-trigger gal looking for her husband. Each one fears that the other is also looking for a cache of one hundred thousand dollars in gold that the murdered band of men is supposed to have buried.

In real life Dick and Donna have similar aims, too. Neither of them likes to be tied down to a contract with one studio. They both accept parts only when they like them.

Dick is just back from Europe, where he

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spent six months making *Prize of Gold* with Mai Zetterling. When he got back he announced that he was going to start producing movies himself. His appearance in *Backlash* is a start in this direction—at least in the money-making department, which is certainly an important department from the producer's point of view. Dick gets a slice of whatever profits are reaped from *Backlash*.

Donna is completely a free-lance actress. She likes to be free to accept a really terrific part whenever it comes along, from no matter what studio. Her part in *From Here to Eternity* was one of those terrific ones, and it won her an Academy Award.

She's in the enviable position of being able to turn down more roles than she accepts. She's married to a prosperous producer, Tony Owen, so she doesn't have to worry about the grocery bills. She read and rejected a dozen scripts before she accepted the part in *Backlash*.

She was glad she did—not only because of the acting possibilities, but also because she had a wonderful time when she wasn't before the cameras. She's the only woman in the cast, and she told me she'd been treated like a queen while on location.

"Sometimes I could believe I was really back in the Old West," she said, "when women were as scarce as roses in January. On screen I played a pretty rugged gal, able to hold her own with the toughest hombres. But, off the screen, I was treated as if I were fragile, and once when I dropped my handkerchief there was almost a stampede to pick it up."

Another leading member of the cast is William Campbell, whom you'll remember if you saw *Man Without a Star*. In that picture he played a young tenderfoot who nearly shot off all his toes trying to learn to handle his sixgun. He's come a long way since then. At least, he's learned how to handle that shooting iron. He plays a character named Johnny Cool, but there's nothing cool about his trigger finger, or his head.

I think you'll enjoy *Backlash*—if you enjoy remembering the days of the West when men were men, and the days in Hollywood when Westerns were Westerns.

Thinking Donna Reed has betrayed him, Richard Widmark slaps her

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RICHARD LONG
Two-Career Man

RANCH FLICKER TALK

THE TRAGEDY that cast its shadow on Richard Long is a tough thing for him to lick. The world forgets quickly his love for and loyalty to his beautiful wife Suzan Ball, but Dick doesn't forget.

He doesn't talk much about her brave but hopeless fight against cancer, but he did say this: "If I had it to do all over again, I wouldn't change what I did." When he married Suzan he knew there wasn't much chance that she'd pull through. But he was beside her right to the end, and he's glad he had as much time with her as he did.

He'll never forget, of course, but he won't brood either. He's thrown himself into his work, and the jobs can't come too fast for him. He doesn't want even a few days off between pictures.

Just recently he got his first starring part in Columbia's *Cult of the Cobra,* and right after that he played the lead in *Fury at Gunsight Pass* for the same studio.

Dick never planned to become an actor, though he played his first part at the age of 12. His family lived in Chicago at the time, and Dick appeared in the grown-up role of a school teacher in *Tom Sawyer.*

Dick's acting career lapsed after that. When he was 16 his family moved to Hollywood. In his last year of high school there, he played a lead in a drama club presentation. Afterward he was astonished to find himself being congratulated by a casting director with a contract in his pocket. And the next thing he knew he was working for Universal.

The studio kept him busy with one part after another in a dozen films, including *The Egg and I, Tap Roots, The Dark Mirror,* and a whole series of Ma and Pa Kettle films. But Dick was restless, and he regretted that his movie career had interfered with his getting a college education. So in 1948 he tried to combine the two. But after one semester at U.C.L.A., he found that studying and acting just wouldn't mix, and decided to concentrate on his career.

Not long afterward there was another interruption, in the form of Greetings from Uncle Sam. Dick served two years in the Army, but his fans didn't forget him. They didn't have a chance to, as it happened, because he played in *Willie and Joe Back at the Front* while he was a GI in Tokyo.

Since his discharge he has been working steadily, except for the time he devoted to Suzan. But even now, when he's reached star status, he's not absolutely convinced that acting is the career for him.

He has always had a yen to be a writer. Just recently he had a short story published, and he confided to me that he really wanted to crack that field.

"I'd hate to have to choose between acting and writing, though," he said. "I suppose what I'd like best is to write a good movie script with a nice fat part for myself in it."

In spite of two careers going at the same time, Dick's life is not all work and no play. He's an enthusiastic sportsman. He plays golf and tennis, loves to ride and swim, and spends his rest hours in the stands at baseball games.

The habit of working hard and playing hard is well established in Dick, because he comes from a family of six children.

"Families that big," he says, "never have any money to spare, and we all just took it for granted that we had to earn things for ourselves—everything from ice cream cones to bicycles."

As for playing hard, he explains, "I was next to the youngest in the family, and all little kids try to keep up with the bigger ones."

He thought about that for a minute and then went on, "Maybe I'm still trying to do it—to keep up with the big kids, no matter what I'm doing, whether it's acting, writing or walloping a golf ball."

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Columbia

Dick's career was interrupted often, but now his future is set

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The Angry Men

by WILL COTTON

JIM GORDON HAD a hankering to see justice done, and for that he was willing to sacrifice his job, his girl . . . and his life

THERE were times, too many times lately, when he knew he could not go on much longer. Jim Gordon felt that way now, as he knelt beside the torn body of old Ely Rowley. He had seen more than his share of death, lived too intimately with hate and the evil men do. It was time for someone else to shoulder the burden.

His fingers moved, probing. His eyes stamped each detail in his mind, so that it would be there whenever he might need it. He saw the pattern of drying blood, spread out grotesquely against the rough-hewn planks of the floor. There was not much left of old Rowley's face.

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"It's murder, Sheriff," someone said.

Gordon turned the body back the way it had been, and pulled the blanket up over it. He stood up slowly. "Rowley shot himself," he said tonelessly, "in the mouth, with his .44. There's nothing to do but bury him."

The afternoon sunlight, slanting in through the windows, etched the faces staring at him. There was accusation in the silence. Gordon looked away, down at the blanketed figure. He knew what these men were thinking. He felt the same way they did. But that didn't help. No one had killed Rowley but the man who pulled the trigger, and that was Rowley himself.

Hank Rae, thin and raw-boned, his hands gnarled from years of exposure, said, "Maybe it's not murder according to law, but murder it is, sure as I'm standing here. You're sheriff in these parts, and we want action."

Gordon looked back and saw that Jeannie Rae had come in with Rowley's widow. She stood, slim and youthful, her arm around the old woman's waist, supporting her. Her eyes, staring at him, were as bleak as the eyes of the men. When she caught his gaze her eyes fell away. Her action was like a knife twisting inside him.

He turned and went toward the door, his boots sounding hollowly on the floor at each pace. He heard the men following behind him, could sense the intensity of their feeling. He wanted to turn around and face these men, to tell them a few simple truths so that they would understand—particularly so that Jeannie Rae would understand.

These were good men and women, hard-working and honest, his kind of people. But their feelings were running too high. They wouldn't listen; they wouldn't want to understand.

He was unhitching his black gelding when Sanders, who owned the ranch next to Gordon's Circle H range, left the group and strode over to Gordon. Young Steve Rae, Jeannie's brother, followed a pace behind him. Sanders grabbed Jim Gordon's arm. His weathered face was dead white under its tan.

"You're one of us, Jim Gordon," Sanders said, his eyes hot as they bored into Gordon. "Like us, you belong working the range. We made you sheriff because you were one of us, and we needed peace in the area so we could live and work unmolested. You were the best man for the job, and we were glad you accepted. But we aren't any more."

Jim Gordon shoved the toe of his boot into the stirrup. His hand reached for the saddle-horn. "Sanders, no man can bring peace. Only the law can do that. My job is to see that the law has a chance."

Sanders's fingers dug harder into Gordon's shoulder.

"You know why Rowley shot himself," he went on, his voice rising. "Ed Landry drove him to it. And that's murder, even if it doesn't say so in the law books."

"Then change the books," Jim Gordon said.

He started to swing up to the saddle. Someone grabbed his leg, ripping if from the stirrup.

"Gordon's sold out," Steve Rae was shouting. "We ought to teach him he can't sell out on us."

Jim Gordon managed to kick Steve Rae out of the way. He hoisted himself into his seat and brought the gelding around. He held the animal there, while he let his eyes sweep from Sanders and Steve Rae to the other men, still standing silently a few feet away. He felt defeated, almost as if nothing mattered any more.

"Steve," he said wearily, "I'm wearing a badge. I'll forget you tried to grab me, so long as you remember to treat the badge with respect. I don't count, but the badge does."

The blood was rushing into Steve's face. Gordon thought, at seventeen your pride can be mighty strong. Steve wouldn't take what he said easily.

"You sold us out," Steve shouted again. He bent a little forward and his right hand began to move.

The kid was slow, too slow to be dangerous. Gordon watched his movement, bitterness bringing a dry taste to his mouth. He let Steve reach the polished wood of his gun handle, let him slip the weapon clear of the holster. From the door of Rowley's cabin he heard a girl cry out, and he knew it was Jeannie, although he couldn't look up to make sure.

He whipped out his Colt and fired once, as

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Steve Rae was getting set to trigger. The gun in Steve Rae's hand was suddenly flying through the air. It fell with a thud to the ground. The kid's face was white. He grabbed for his empty hand.

"You still have your fingers," Gordon said. "Just remember how good your fingers feel next time you go reaching for your iron."

He wheeled the gelding around and kicked it forward, down the trail to Yellow River. He didn't look back at Rowley's cabin, at the men, at Jeannie. He had learned it was never any good to look back.

JIM GORDON stood just outside the wooden railing in Ed Landry's outer office, looking down at the spectacled clerk whose pen scratched noisily as he pushed it across the foolscap.

"Nice writing," Gordon said. "Like in the copybooks. What I write can hardly be read."

The clerk glanced up. Annoyance twisted his thin lips. "Mr. Landry's in a hurry for this," he said petulently.

"I'm in a hurry to see Mr. Landry," Gordon said softly. "Tell him the sheriff wants a word with him."

Reluctently the clerk laid down his pen. He was a thin youth, pale and already slightly stoop-shouldered.

"The sheriff?" he asked, and peered hard at Gordon.

"You heard me right."

"Mr. Landry isn't in," the clerk said slowly, as if repeating some lesson he had learned in school. "I don't know when to expect him."

Jim Gordon bent a little forward. There was no expression on his face, but his gray eyes were clear and level.

"You can tell Mr. Landry I'll wait until he comes out." he said. "I don't have time to be chasing him around town, when I know he's in his office."

A spot of color flushed the clerk's cheeks. He pushed back his stool. "Just a moment," he said trying to force a smile. "I'll see what I can find out."

He walked back and knocked on the door at the rear of the office before opening it. He was back almost immediately.

"I made a mistake, Sheriff," he said trying to cover his embarrassment with a suggestion of a cough. "Mr. Landry will see you right away."

Gordon grinned. "Don't take it so hard, man. You had your orders."

He went over to the door of Landry's private office. It was standing ajar. He pushed it open and stepped inside.

Ed Landry swung around in his swivel chair, a big man with thick black hair and heavy jowls. "Howdy, Sheriff," he said. "Sorry my stupid boy kept you waiting. But I'd told him I wasn't to be disturbed."

Gordon's eyes traveled around the office, taking in the big rolltop desk at which Landry was seated, the stack of account books piled in one corner, the painted picture hanging crookedly on one wall. The picture could have been Ed Landry, twenty years before. The office smelt mustily of old papers.

"Ely Rowley blew off the top of his skull a little less than three hours ago," Gordon said slowly. "Reckon you'd know, Landry, why he did that."

Landry's eyebrows knit. "Rowley?" he questioned. "The name's familiar."

"It should be," Gordon said.

Landry wet his thick bottom lip with the tip of his tongue. He wasn't much of an actor, Gordon thought. But then, Landry didn't have to be.

"Have a seat, Sheriff," Landry said now. "I don't figure how what you say is any of my business, but if you want to talk about it—"

"It happen Rowley ran the Mercantile here until you took it over from him because he couldn't meet his bills. At the time you were selling to the ranchers at less than cost, selling the same things Rowley had stocked in the Mercantile. When you bought him out, your prices went up. There was no competition then."

"A man's entitled to a fair profit on his investment," Landry said with a show of dignity.

"So Rowley took what you gave him for his business and bought a little farm. But Rowley was a storekeeper, not a farmer. He didn't make out so well. He had to sell what little he grew, but he could only sell to you, and you wouldn't pay much. He was going

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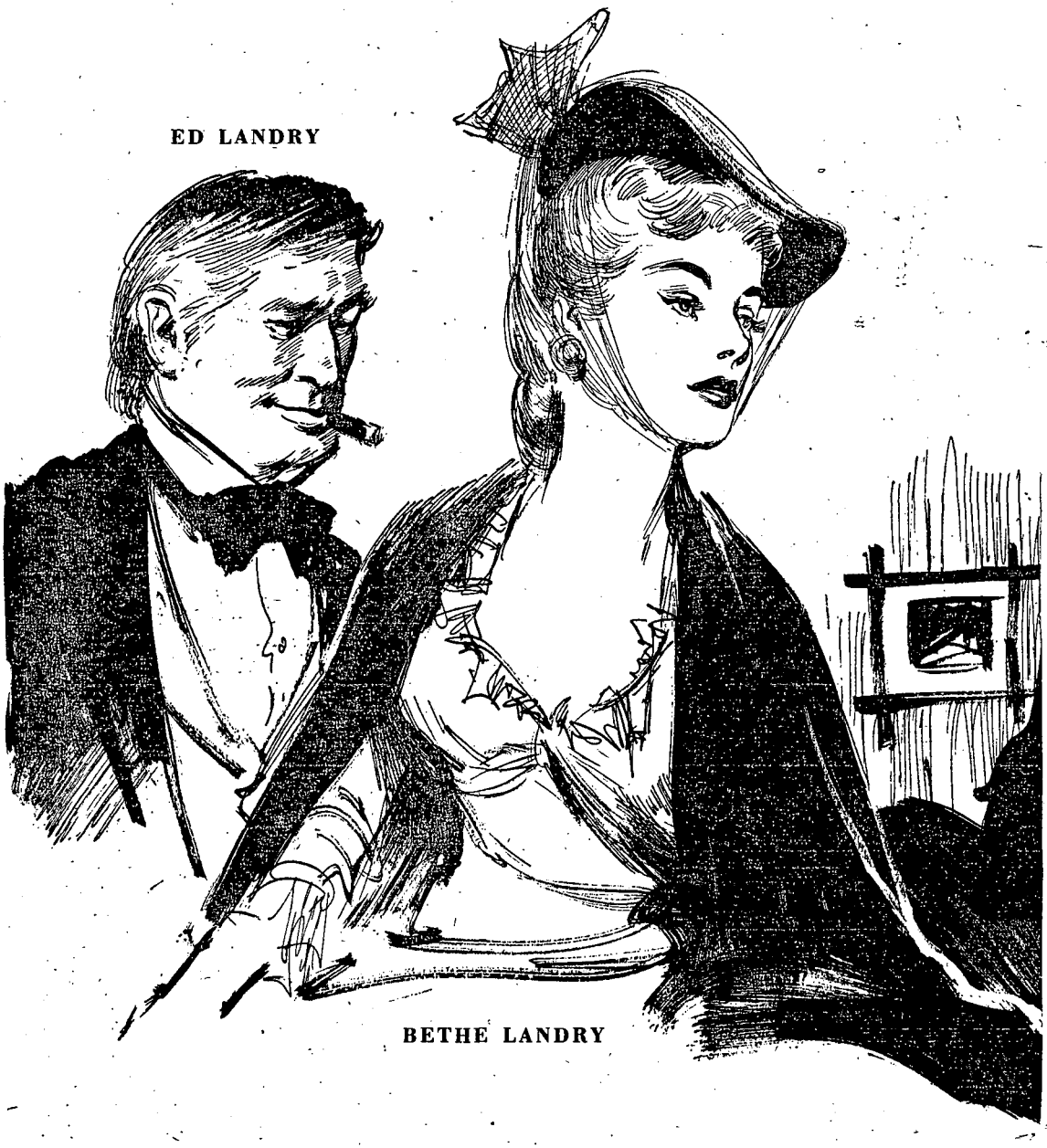

into debt all the time. You gave him credit, so much credit he could never climb out. And now he's killed himself. I just figured maybe you'd know why."

Landry was breathing heavily. He leaned back in his chair.

"Whatever give you that idea, Sheriff?" he asked.

"Your man Wade was out talking to Rowley last night. That's what give me the idea."

Landry began to chuckle. His heavy jowls quivered.

"You lawmen get so you're suspicious of everyone," he said after a moment. "Wade's call on Rowley didn't have anything to do with his shooting himself. I'm sure of that much.

Gordon let a hand drop to his side. "You remember the name now, anyway."

Landry gave Jim Gordon a swift glance.

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LANDRY swiveled back to his desk, pulled open a drawer, and reached in. He came out with a bottle of whisky, which he held out to Jim Gordon.

"I drink on my own time."

"Don't know if I like the way you're talking, Sheriff," Landry said then. "But I guess I can ignore it. You're just trying to do your job."

There was a tinge of mockery in Landry's

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tone. A warmth began to spread up the back of Jim Gordon's neck. He let Landry go on.

"Anyway, now I'm chairman of the town council, maybe you won't have to be coming around busy men asking questions. Not for much longer, anyway."

"Right now, I still have my badge."

Landry waved his hand deprecatingly. "Sure," he said. "You asked me a question. I gave you an answer. I have a lot to do, so if you'll excuse me—"

He started to swivel back to his desk. Gordon stepped forward and caught his shoulder. He swung Landry around to face him.

"You can give me another answer," he said, his voice going suddenly very cold. "What business did Wade have with Rowley last night?"

Landry's face had turned purple. He looked as if he were on the verge of a stroke. Then Gordon heard the voice behind him.

"Get your hands off the boss, Gordon. He doesn't have to answer your questions."

Gordon slowly relaxed his grip on Landry's shoulder. He said, turning around slowly, "Maybe you can answer, Wade."

He found Eddie Wade slouched in the doorway, a cigarette in the corner of his mouth. His right hand was close to the heel of his .45. It wouldn't be a good idea to draw a gun on the sheriff, though, Gordon thought. And Wade was smart. If he hadn't been, Gordon would have run him out of town before this, even if he was Landry's gun. But, like his boss, Wade knew enough to keep his actions within the letter of the law.

"Rowley owed the boss some money. He couldn't pay. I went out to tell him he could have more time." Wade's tone was casual, as if he attached little importance to his words.

Gordon felt the chords in his neck tighten. He knew Wade was lying, but he couldn't prove it. He said, "Wade, you ever think of leaving town? It might be a good move."

"Leave town, Sheriff? No, I can't say I have. I like it here. I reckon I'll stay."

"So Landry can pin a star on your vest?"

Landry said heavily, "You got your answer, Sheriff. Now go."

"Yeah, I got an answer. I'll be going."

"Just a minute."

Something in Landry's tone caught Gordon—a trace of menace, he thought. But when he looked at Landry, the man was smiling.

"Heard your ranch wasn't doing so well," Landry said.

"Being sheriff doesn't give me much time. I have a good top hand, but he can't see to everything."

"I know." Landry had taken out a cigar. He bit the end off thoughtfully. "You were more or less pressed into taking over the job of lawman. Maybe you should have sold out your spread."

"My old man staked that spread out. I'll be back to working it, one day."

"Maybe soon," Landry said. "Meanwhile, you had to borrow some money at the bank to pay your hands."

"That's business between me and the bank, Landry."

"Sure," Landry said. His voice resumed its heavy friendliness. "It may interest you to know that this afternoon arrangements have been made for me to take over control of the bank. That means your business will be between you and me."

"My debts will be paid on time."

Landry began to chuckle. "I don't doubt it, Sheriff. But you might like to know, if things go on being bad, that you'll be doing your business with me."

Jim Gordon didn't answer. He turned away, and walked past Wade into the outer office. The clerk was too busy writing to look up as he went out.

GORDON was too preoccupied to notice her as he stepped from Ed Landry's office onto the board sidewalk. Then he heard the rustle of silk and a faint odor of perfume as she brushed against him.

"Oh, Jim Gordon," Bethe Landry said, backing away a step and smiling at him. "There's no one I'd rather bump into."

Gordon fumbled for his hat. "Sorry, Miss Landry. Reckon I wasn't looking where I was going."

"You must have been seeing my father," she said. "Why don't you come to visit him at the house? Then afterward we could have coffee and talk."

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He felt awkward, especially as her look suggested she was holding back some inner amusement.

"I don't have much time for coffee and talk, Miss Landry," he told her, "but I'll remember your invitation."

He said that out of politeness. But he was surprised at the warmth of her response.

"You do that. Come soon. I've been wanting to know you better for a long time."

She smiled again, and then she was gone, disappearing into her father's office.

Gordon put his hat back on and walked over to the hitching rack. She was a strange girl, he thought, not like Jeannie Rae. Sophisticated, maybe, was the word. He did not know much about her; she had only recently returned from the East, where she had been at school. But he sensed a hardness in her, some core of wilfulness that was a little frightening. She might be more dangerous than her father.

He knew little of women. They had played a minor role in his life. Even his mother he hardly remembered.

It was Jeannie Rae who had managed to reach the unknown part of him. It had happened quite recently—a year ago, perhaps. He had noticed, then, of a sudden, that she was no longer a scrawny girl, the daughter of a fellow rancher, but a woman whose every word, every action spoke to the manhood in him.

It was a wild and exciting response that she stirred, a response that sent blood running hotly through him and made his heart pound crazily. He had taken to dropping by the Rae spread when he could, and they had sometimes gone out riding together in the early dusk. He would have liked to be with her more often, but he had his job. It left him little time.

He thought about these things as he rode slowly across the plaza of Yellow River. In the late afternoon, the sidewalks were quiet. Even Labby's place, the one saloon remaining this side of the river, was quiet as he rode past the batwings.

It was a growing town, Yellow River, the false fronts around the plaza only the center for the shacks and tin-roofed frame buildings that were spreading out in all directions. It was a raw, bustling town, its population swollen because of the silver that had been discovered back in the hills.

Across the river, in the flats, were the drinking joints, the gambling halls, the girls. It was there the miners thronged to spend their gains, there where Gordon and his deputy, Tab Nels, spent most of the night in endless patrol, keeping the rowdyism from spreading.

There had been a rash of trouble lately, that seemed to spring up out of nowhere. A rancher had been bushwhacked as he rode back from town, one dark night. A gambler had been beaten up so badly he never came out of the coma. The Bluefield's mine payroll had been lifted by a lone bandit. It was violence that Jim Gordon hadn't been able to track down, that left him with a gnawing frustration, because it was his job to track it down.

He came to his clean bare office, in the big gray stone Town Hall which had just been completed at one end of the plaza. It was a monstrous building for a town like Yellow River, he thought—far too pretentious. But Ed Landry had wanted it, and put up his own money so it could be built.

Gordon found Tab Nels sitting behind his desk, whittling at a stick. "Looks like a bad night," Tab said. "About a hundred diggers came in from the East hills, raring to have a time."

"We'll keep the lid on," Gordon said.

THEY had buried Ely Rowley—had dug a hole seven feet deep in the range, shoveled the dirt back, and packed it tight. Someone had tied two sticks together to form a cross, and Sanders stuck it in the earth just about where old Rowley's head would be resting, down under.

Then they held a meeting in Rowley's cabin. There were seven men there, and Jeannie Rae. She wanted to be there, and they let her stay. There wasn't much palaver; there wasn't any need of it. It was decided quickly, because the time had come when a decision had to be made.

At the end, Sanders cut seven slivers of wood of different lengths, and each man, with-

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out looking, took a sliver. Steve Rae drew the shortest.

* * *

It seemed to Jim Gordon as if he had just fallen asleep when he felt himself being shaken roughly by the shoulder. The voice calling his name drifted familiarly into his sleep-soaked brain. Dimly he was aware of the urgency in the tone. He tried to shut it out, knowing only that his body and mind were not ready for coming awake, that his whole being was filled with a deadening fatigue he was powerless to combat.

Yet the shaking continued, more violently. He let his eyes flutter open, trying to clear the torpor from his head. The lantern light momentarily blinded him.

"Get your boots on," the familiar voice said. "There's bad medicine down at Labby's place."

Jim Gordon placed the voice then. He came up on his elbows, feeling the blood begin to circulate again through his body. "Yeah, Tab," he said thickly. "Trouble at Labby's place. You can handle it."

He could make out his deputy's face, staring at him from behind the lantern. There was a chill in the night air that worked its way through his flesh. He realized Tab must have pulled the blanket off him.

"Reckon you'd want to be in on this," Tab said, his tone still strained. "There was an attempted stickup. In the fracas Ed Landry was shot."

"Ed Landry!"

Jim Gordon didn't like the sound of that. He was suddenly wide awake. Swinging his legs over the edge of the bunk, he began pulling on his boots.

"One of the gunmen was young Steve Rae," Tab said. "I thought you'd want to know."

Jim Gordon dressed rapidly, using the light from Tab's lantern although he could have found his things in the dark. The fatigue was still on him, but his mind had cleared.

"How long ago did it happen, Tab?"

"Half an hour, maybe. Some men took off after the gunmen. I was to get you."

Jim Gordon picked up his gun belt and adjusted it over his hips. "Ed Landry hurt much?"

"He'll be okey. It's only a bad tear in the shoulder."

"And the kid, Steve Rae—you're sure about him?"

He saw Tab nod. Tab knew how he felt about Steve's sister, Jeannie, even though Jim Gordon had never told him. They worked too closely together for Tab not to know. Jim Gordon checked to make sure his belt was full, then ran a hand across the butt of his Colt.

"Let's go," he said.

He wished he could pause a moment, to give himself time to think things through, to figure what this might mean to himself, to Yellow River, to Jeannie Rae. But this was a time for action.

Out side, the night air was colder. The stars in the black sky were bright and close to the earth. He could hear faintly the beat of hoofs coming from the direction of the plaza and the muffled voices of men calling out to one another. He saddled his black gelding quickly, with fingers that worked smoothly out of habit.

As he swung into the saddle, he was conscious that what had happened tonight in Labby's place might well alter the whole direction of his life, because of Ed Landry and Jeannie. This was not just another attempted robbery; it was a threat to everything he hoped for.

LABBY'S place was a shambles. The smell of gun smoke still cut the reek of liquor fumes and tobacco smoke. Tables had been overturned, the large mirror over the bar was smashed. Patches of drying blood were splattered over sawdust.

There had been shoot-ups in Labby's place before. Jim Gordon would have liked to move it across the river, but Labby's had always been on the plaza. It had been the second building in Yellow River. So it remained there, and Gordon had found it a special job to keep its brawls from spilling out over the quieter sections of town.

He had sent Tab to find out if any sign had been picked up of the fleeing bandits. Now, as the batwings swung behind him, he let his gray eyes shuttle over the saloon, at the damage that was everywhere apparent, at

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the knot of about a dozen men still gathered at the bar.

A few seconds passed. Then Labby himself caught sight of Gordon from behind the bar, and beckoned. Gordon walked over slowly, his eyes alert as he memorized the scene around him. Labby moved away from the knot of men and leaned forward so that he could talk to Gordon without being overheard. By that time, Gordon's presence in the saloon was common knowledge. Eyes studied him, then turned away. He catalogued the faces for possible use in the future.

"It happened so quick," Labby was saying, "we were caught flat. I didn't even see all of the men, though folks tell me there were five or six. But Ed Landry, who was at the faro layout, figured it out and pulled his gun. This Steve Rae was over by the door, and he must have seen what Landry intended. Anyway, the kid pumped lead before Landry had a chance."

"Ed Landry doesn't come here often," Jim Gordon said. "Why tonight?"

"Oh, Landry comes once in a while," Labby said, "when the hotel gets too tame fur him. It's lucky that, at the shooting, his man Wade started firing, and the bandits must have gotten nervous. They cleared out fast." Labby spread his hands flat on the bar and sighed. "It'll cost plenty to get my place fixed up."

"You have plenty of money, Labby."

Labby smiled a sickly grin. "Everyone figures I'm a rich man," he said sadly. "When as a matter of fact—"

"About Rae," Gordon cut in, unwilling to waste time on Labby's self-pity. "You're sure he shot Landry?"

"Who else?" Labby's shoulders hunched. "I saw it with my own eyes."

"The kid came in with the bandits?"

"I wouldn't know. Seems I remember seeing him here earlier in the evening, but I can't be sure. He got a slug in the leg."

Gordon looked away. "I figure there wasn't time to take your Saturday night's haul," he said. "Ed Landry and Wade spiked that."

"No, they didn't get anything but a few hunks of lead. Tab was here right quick and put some men on the trail, while I got Doc for Landry. We carried Landry home."

"And that's all you know. You never saw the other men before?"

Labby shook his head.

"You don't really know anything?"

"I know what I told you, Sheriff," Labby protested.

Jim Gordon stared at the saloon owner bleakly. "Seems to me there's too much trouble here lately," he said softly. "It's about time your place closed up."

Labby began to wring his hands. He looked very hurt.

"It's not my fault some loco gunslicks came in to steal my money," he said, almost whining. "I try to run a peaceful place."

"Maybe, Labby, you don't try hard enough," Gordon said.

He talked to the other men, but they had all come in since the shooting. That was what he was told, anyway; he didn't believe it. He wondered if he had reached the point where he wouldn't believe anyone any more, even if he were told the truth.

Steve Rae had shot up Ed Landry. Rae wasn't a bad kid, but there was a streak of wildness in him that would have to be tamed. Landry would be bellowing for action, yet if Jim Gordon read the signs right, it was Ed Landry himself who had brought this on. This wasn't an attempted raid on Labby's place; that was too pat. Any outlaws who knew their way around would have staged it so they had a chance of carrying off the loot. Jim Gordon guessed the shooting had been a blind to cover up an attempt on Ed Landry's life. Luckily, Steve Rae had shot wild, only wounding him.

Gordon took his gelding's halter and began leading it across the dark plaza, wanting just then to walk and stretch the tendons in his tense body. He had almost reached his office, in the gray stone building that reared up so massively in the darkness. The moon had gone down. The stars had a faded look. The silence, pressing in around him, made the thud of the gelding's hoofs against the hard-packed earth an ominous intrusion in the night.

He saw the spit of flame, coming from a corner of the Town Hall, before the dry crack of the exploding gun slapped his ear drums. Lead whistled by him.

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JIM GORDON threw himself to the ground, tearing at his holster. A second shot split the stillness. It passed over his head. He had his weapon out by then, and he thumbed the hammer and sent a shot in the direction of his attacker. For a moment, nothing more happened.

He waited, unwilling to give away his position until he was sure where he should aim. He could see nothing, hear nothing except his own breathing. He began slithering forward in the dust, toward the corner of the building around which he guessed whoever had fired was holding cover. A voice came shouting out of the night, from his rear.

"Jim Gordon, you can't stay in the middle. You have to choose which side you are on. That is all. You have to choose."

He heard then the sound of running feet, and the creak of leather, as men scrambled into saddles. Gordon jumped to his feet, his gun kicking in his hand as he triggered toward the sound. But whoever had been staked out around the plaza had disappeared behind the buildings. Driving hoofs were receding into the night. He let his gun fall to his side, knowing it was useless to continue firing. Useless also, probably, to take up pursuit. The riders were fanning out into the night in different directions. They had not meant him any harm; it was only a warning. And he could guess why the warning was given, and guess who was behind it.

He rubbed some of the dust from his face. The gelding was waiting for him, a little way off. He had trained the animal not to spook at the sound of guns. A figure was running toward him, and he could tell it was his deputy Tab long before they met.

"You came in early from the trail," Jim Gordon said.

Tab ignored his remark. "You all right, boss? I heard guns." He sounded breathless.

"I'm whole. What are you doing back in town so quick?"

"I checked with the posses, boss. The bandits seem to have disappeared in the night. There wasn't no sign to be picked up. Maybe in daylight—"

Gordon shrugged wearily. "Yeah," he said. "There was no sign, because no one was particularly anxious to find it. Well, keep on it, Tab. I want those men."

"Sure, boss." Tab's voice sounded unconvinced.

"I'll be looking up Steve Rae myself," Gordon went on. "You like toting that badge, Tab?"

"Of course. What do you mean?"

"Figure it out for yourself. Now get busy."

He had meant what he had said, that he'd be looking up Steve Rae. But he was reluctant to make the move, although it would have to be done. So he rode first to Ed Landry's place, a big white house that sat on a ridge on the outskirts of town.

One light burned, sifting dimly through a curtained window. Gordon had to rap twice on the heavy door before he heard a bolt draw back. The door swung slowly inward on oiled hinges.

"Who's there?" a girl's voice called out.

It was Bethe Landry, Jim Gordon thought. He did not want to see her just then, but there was nothing he could do. "Sheriff Gordon."

The door swung wider.

"Oh, Jim," Bethe said, appearing now from around the door. "Come in and tell me what happened. They brought my father home—"

"I've come to see your dad. I haven't much time."

She sucked in her breath. He stood stiffly, hat in hand, trying to ignore the soft frilly gown she was wearing. The shadows made her features softer than he knew them to be in reality. Her full lips began to tremble.

"It's awful," she said. "I don't understand, and I couldn't sleep. Why should anyone shoot my father?"

"Maybe it was an accident," Gordon suggested. "I've got to talk to him."

She sighed. He felt suddenly sorry for her. Nothing in her schooling back East would have prepared her for this. She was alone and defenseless. Yet that wasn't really true. He thought she was playing a part for him.

She broke into his thoughts. "My father is sleeping, and the doctor said it would be dangerous to disturb him. I couldn't let you."

"I suppose not."

"Oh, why are you so hard?" she said, suddenly angry. "Come in and talk to me. I

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"I'm not selling out to Landry, whatever you do," Gordon said

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can't sleep anyway. Does a woman have to throw herself at you to make you notice her?"

"I've got no time for women, Miss Landry. I'll be around to see your father later."

"That won't be necessary."

The door came slamming in his face. Jim Gordon gave a low gasp of surprise. He waited a moment, and saw the light go out abruptly. Inside the house he heard faintly the sound of light feet running up stairs.

Landry could wait, he decided. He had wasted too much time as it was. In the east, the first faint glimmer of light showed along the horizon as he headed out of Yellow River for the Rae spread.

HE FOUND the Raes and their two hands at breakfast. He could sense, as he entered, the tension he brought with him. It was almost a physical thing, a barrier that separated him from them, freezing the feeling that had once been warm between them. He had come to this home often as a friend, accepted as Jeannie's man, and now he was looked on as apart from them, an enemy.

Old man Rae mumbled the right things, asking Jim Gordon to sit down with them to eat, but the strain of his gesture of hospitality showed in his lined face. His wife, thin and haggard, her mouth twisted as if she were bearing some secret pain, did not even look up at him. And Jeannie, full of her young womanhood, her black hair falling around her shoulders, sat very stiffly in her chair, two spots of red standing out vividly in her drawn white cheeks.

Steve Rae was not with them. Gordon had not expected he would be. Feeling a tightness across his abdomen, he said gruffly, "I reckon you know why I came."

There was no answer, only a blank stillness. A spoon rattled against the side of a mug as one of the hired hands stirred his coffee.

"Maybe you'll come outside with me for a little while, Jeannie," Gordon suggested. "Maybe we can talk."

"I don't think so. There's nothing much we can say, is there?"

A moment of panic gripped him. Was he going to have to lose her, too? Was this the way it had to be? He shifted his weight, taking in a deep breath. The hands at his side were clenched into tight fists.

"Your brother shot a man last night. He's in bad trouble. It's more than likely that, if I don't find him, Landry's man Wade will. It's better that I find Steve first."

He was watching her, and he caught the sudden fear that crossed her features. He was sorry he had said what he did. She was in deep enough distress without his having suggested worse. But Jeannie pushed back her chair and stood up. She steadied herself momentarily, resting her hand on the table.

"If you want to talk—" she said slowly.

She followed him as he went outside, leaving the rest of the family because it would be better if he could talk to Jeannie alone.

They went over to the corral. Already the morning sun was hot against the earth, burning the brown bunchgrass of the range. It made Jim Gordon remember his own rangeland, waiting to show what could be accomplished when a man was willing to strain his muscles. That was where he belonged. Instead he was hunting for a kid who had gunned a man who had grown fat and rich by being ruthless.

He leaned against a rail, not knowing how to start, strangely tongue-tied in the presence of this girl who meant so much to him.

She was nothing like Bethe Landry, not nearly so beautiful in the way most men considered a girl beautiful. He had no great understanding of love, only an awareness that in Jeannie there was some inner loveliness that seemed to speak only to him. He felt the need to be near her, to give her understanding and protection. He would have liked to reach out, now, and touch her gently.

"You really think that Wade might be out looking for Steve?"

Her question pulled him back to the moment. "If not now, soon. Landry isn't one to let a gunning go unanswered."

He noticed she was trembling. "I don't know where Steve is," she said decidedly. "He hasn't been home."

"You oughtn't to lie to me, Jeannie. It's best I take Steve in."

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He could see she didn't believe him. "Landry got what he deserved," she protested. "He should be out of the way. He's brought nothing but trouble and ugliness to the whole area. It was on account of Landry that Ely Rowley shot himself. Anyway, you haven't any proof against Steve."

She would have gone on, but Jim Gordon raised a hand to stop her.

"There can always be a mistake. That's up to the law to decide. As for Landry, when he breaks the law, then I'll go after him, hard. But as far as I can tell, up to now he hasn't."

"There's a moral law, Jim." She was pleading with him. It made him uncomfortable, as if he had suddenly become unclean. "A moral law that's more important than anything else. Landry's broken that law, Jim Gordon. And if your precious law doesn't work, some of us have to take things into our own hands."

"That isn't the way, Jeannie. You could all be wrong."

"We're not wrong."

"Anyway, I've got to find Steve. I need your help."

She looked at him with hurt anger. "You don't have to find him. For me and what we mean to each other, you could let him get away—far away, so Wade wouldn't find him."

So it was that way, he thought wearily. She couldn't see he had no choice, that a lawman could only do one thing.

"Reckon I'll be having a look around," he said gruffly.

He turned, staring into the bright sun which hurt his eyes. He had forgotten how little sleep he had had. His whole frame was bone weary, his soul sick with what he had to do. If Jeannie could understand, it would be easier. But why should she? She was half right about Landry. She loved her brother. There was no choice for her to make.

He heard her soft cry, and then she was tugging at his arm. He swung around and looked down into her tortured face. He knew now, with a sure certainty, that she loved him in return, that she also was torn, uncertain of whether to give in to the man she loved, to trust him even if she didn't understand what motives drove him, or to give him up to save her own blood-brother.

Jim Gordon could read that in her agonized features. And he could read, also, the decision slowly being formed. He felt an emptiness growing within him, taking complete possession of him.

SHE tried one last time, with desperate urgency. "Please Jim, for my sake—our sake—don't look for Steve. By this time tomorrow he'll be gone."

"He's here, then." It seemed to Jim Gordon as if someone else were saying the words.

"No, don't find him here—because I love you and if you do—"

She broke off. She had said it, for the first time—that she loved him. But it only made his hollowness heavier. He ran his hand across his forehead. It was greasy with sweat.

"Go back to town, Jim. It's as easy as that."

"I wish it were that easy," he said tonelessly. "Listen to me a minute. Steve shot a man. It's better he face it. Once a man starts running away, he never stops running. That's the way life is. Now, where is he hiding?"

She let go of his hand. She stood looking at him, as if numb, expressionless. Her mouth worked and words came out, sharp and hard, striking him like the blows of a hammer.

"I hate you, Jim Gordon. I used to love you, but now I hate you. I never want to see you again."

So she had made the choice. He said softly, "If that's the way you want it, you never will."

He found Steve sleeping on a bed of hay in the winter feed shed. The kid hadn't heard him pry open the lock. But as Jim Gordon stood over him, he moaned and turned on his side. The right leg of his levis had been ripped open up to the thigh, revealing a blood-soaked bandage just above the knee.

"I've come for you, Steve," Jim Gordon said softly. "Let's get about our business."

He prodded the reclining figure gently with the toe of his boot.

The kid was suddenly awake. He sat up, eyes wide, his whole body going tense. He began clawing in the hay.

"I wouldn't," Gordon told him. "Before you could lift your gun, I could drill you clean through."

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"You would," Steve said. His tone was bitter, but he made no further move.

"I would if I had to. Get up and let's see how high you can reach."

"What are you going to do with me?"

"Take you to town and keep you safe until we can get a trial."

Steve stood up. He began to brush hay from his clothes.

"I said hands over your head, man," Gordon directed.

"If you want."

Steve raised his arms slowly. His face had taken on a set expression, but Gordon noticed the quiver of his lips. Despite his brave words, Jim Gordon could see Steve was scared. Momentarily he felt a wave of pity for the kid, sensing that he was finding himself in deeper trouble than he had intended.

Gordon asked, "What's behind this, Steve? You aren't a gunslick. You had no reason to be pulling a gun in Labby's place."

"There was a raid. I tried to get one of the bandits."

"The way I heard it, you pulled a gun on Landry. If you didn't, why did you hide in the hay?"

Steve dropped his arms a little. His confidence seemed to be returning. "I came home drunk," he answered truculently. "My old man doesn't like to see me that way. Neither does my sister. So they locked me in the shed."

Gordon shrugged. He was tired of hearing lies, tired of the whole business. "Okey, have it any way you want. But you're coming into town with me."

"You're the sheriff," Steve said. "You have to bring in someone. Only I thought you were our friend. You sure acted like it with Sis." He began limping toward the shed door.

Outside, the bright sunlight was suddenly blinding. Gordon heard the swish of cloth by his side. Then he blinked hard, clearing his vision. Steve was a few yards away, limping rapidly toward the corral. Then something cold and hard dug at his ribs.

"Sorry, Sheriff," he heard Jeannie Rae saying. "If you won't help my brother, I will."

He saw Steve glance backward, then start running, his wounded leg dragging. There was a dappled pony tied to one of the corral rails, saddled and ready.

JIM GORDON wondered if Jeannie Rae would use the rifle she held, if he should try to break out after Steve. She was upset, her nerves stretched to their limit. You never could tell how anyone would act in a crisis.

But he mustn't give her a chance to pull the trigger. Not that he cared about himself, because he had faced many moments like this, when death was very close, and he had ceased to care. But she would never forget if he made her gun him. Even if Steve got away, the memory that she had killed the man she had loved would be a wound that would always bring her pain.

"Let him go," he said, defeat heavy within him. He slowly swung around to face her.

He noted the tightness of the skin stretched over her cheekbones, the terror in her deep yes. She had been afraid, too, of what he might make her do. The rifle dropped suddenly to her side. She began to tremble.

He said, "It would have been better the other way."

Now he wanted to take her, crush her to him, drive all the grief and unhappiness from her. But he did nothing, said nothing. Steve must have reached the pony by that time, because there was a sudden rattle of hoofs. They waited, neither knowing what to say. The sound of the galloping pony faded, leaving them alone under the hot sun.

Jim Gordon reached out and grasped hold of the barrel of the rifle. Jeannie let him have it. He broke it open and took out the cartridges. When he had finished, he handed the gun back to her, then turned to leave.

"I didn't mean everything I said." There was a strange tenseness in her tone. "About not wanting to see you ever again, I mean. When this is over—"

He paused just a moment, to see if he could find any hope in what she said. But he realized there was no hope.

"This will never be over," he said. "This will always be between us."

He left her standing there. It was like dying a little.

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He rode slowly, fighting to keep sleep from taking hold of him. The warm sun, the steady sway of the gelding, were a drug, deadening his senses. He would have liked to ride out to his ranch, talk a little with his foreman, and then let the sleep he was fighting off take over. He would be undisturbed there, sought out only in an emergency. But the emergency was at hand. He could not shake the feeling that another attempt on Landry's life would be made.

The trail rose, then began to dip. Between the scrub pinyons Gordon could see the buildings of Yellow River lying in the flat basin below, shimmering in the heat waves. Riding on, he came to a bend from which he could look out over the rangeland and see the border of his own grass. He thought, I've been with this job too long. It would be better to turn in my badge, to return to the range where I belong.

He could not trust himself any more. He had let Steve Rae escape, had allowed a moment of sentiment to sway him from his job. The law was more important than any one person, even Jeannie. He had broken his oath, and knowing that was worse than knowing there could never be anything between him and Jeannie again. Knowing that, indeed, made it impossible to face her again.

The plaza was deserted under the noon sun as he rode in. The gelding's hoofs kicked up a cloud of yellow dust. Even Labby's place was quiet. He went inside, finding his office cool and silent.

Tab must have released the drunks gathered in the night before, because there was no sound from the cells which were on the passageway that led off from the office. Gordon unbuckled his gun belt, set it on his desk, and dropped into a chair. Involuntarily his eyelids drooped and his head began to nod. His whole body seemed to be going slack. His brain was growing numb.

And then time was swirling around him. There was no present, no past, only vague moments through which he had lived floating up from the depths of his mind, fragments of memory wanting to be recaptured.

He tried to catch the fragments, hold them, explore them, but they kept eluding him, until at last there was only one memory left that kept returning and taunting him. It had happened when he was a boy. He caught a faint outline of his mother's face, and then the scream. Odd, he could not remember what the men looked like, only that they smelled of stale sweat.

HE DIDN'T want to remember any more, but then it was suddenly all there, complete and in clear focus. His mother was on the floor, her blood vividly red against the whiteness of her body. He had run up to one of the men and tried to beat him with his small fists, and the man had laughed and pushed him away so roughly he had gone sprawling to the floor.

The man kicked him, and then they had gone out, leaving him lying there with his bleeding mother, unable to get up because of the pain in his chest. And then, after a long time, his father had come in and he had heard his father's cry of anguish and he could not look at either of them, his father or his mother, because he knew this moment was too awful for him to be a part of.

Now Gordon tried to twist time so that this memory would go away, and presently he was grown up again and searching with a desperate urgency down a long dark cavern for something he couldn't find. He couldn't find it because he was aware all the time that what he looked for didn't exist. It was the justice that had never overtaken the men who had murdered his mother.

His father had spent a lifetime trying to track them down. When he was older, Jim Gordon had sometimes accompanied his father on one of his manhunts, but the trail always led nowhere. And now he was still trying to find justice, searching, searching, searching and never reaching it, because men found it so much easier to ignore the lawlessness about them than to stand up and give it battle.

He awoke in a sweat. The office was almost dark. Gordon figured he must have been asleep for some hours. His body felt cramped, and he bent his elbows and raised them shoulder high, stretching his neck backward. It was odd that Tab hadn't come in. He had

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heard nothing from his deputy since early morning. Well, Tab must know what he was doing.

Gordon pushed back his chair and stood up, reaching for his gun belt. It was then he became suddenly conscious that he wasn't alone. A dark figure was leaning against the wall, just inside the door.

"Did I scare you?"

Gordon recognized immediately Eddie Wade's thin voice. He continued buckling his belt around his waist.

"I came down to get you." Wade went on. "Mr. Landry wants a word with you."

"Tell him I'll be around when I'm ready." He didn't like being ordered to see Landry that way.

Wade flicked a match with the nail of his thumb. He held it in his cupped hand while he lit a smoke, then threw the match on the floor.

"When you're ready isn't soon enough," Wade said. "I don't want any trouble."

Gordon stepped out from around his desk. "You'll get it, if you don't vamoose."

He heard Wade suck in his breath. "I was told to bring you up to the house," he said after a moment. "Right now, my gun is lined up with your guts. I reckon you'd better do what Landry wants."

Jim Gordon made a slow calculation of his chances. He didn't think he could outshoot Wade. He could see, even in the dim light, that Wade's holster was tilted up. That meant he'd be firing through the tip, the way some gunmen did to gain a brief second's advantage.

Gordon said softly, "Okay, Wade, you called it."

He took two paces toward the door. He was within a few feet of Wade, who was swinging around to follow him out. Abruptly, Gordon wheeled, bringing up his right fist. He slammed it hard into Wade's middle.

The gunman doubled up, his trigger finger tripped, and a shot went ricocheting against the wall. As Wade straightened, Jim Gordon lifted his left and drove it for Wade's jaw. The gunman went crashing into the window. Glass splintered, tinkled against the floor. Wade cursed, then fired again, wildly.

Gordon was on him before Wade had recovered his balance. It seemed, at that moment, that all the bitterness and frustration in him were suddenly being released. He was throwing his blows savagely, wanting to hurt, to beat this man down.

There were a few seconds when all Wade could do was protect himself from Gordon's hammering. He had no chance to use his gun now. He slid along the wall, trying to get away, but Gordon kept with him. Then Wade brought his knee up, jamming it hard at Gordon. It drove deep into Gordon's abdomen, forcing the wind out of him, so that he had to fall back, gasping for breath. Knuckles crashed into his mouth, sending the shock up his jawbones.

He tasted the salty taste of blood, and a red fog swirled in his brain. He could no longer see clearly, but he was lashing out again and he knew his blows were landing, only now Wade was crowding him, pummeling him in return with slashing fists that seemed weighted with lead.

GORDON drove himself harder. He swung from the hip, short jabbing punches, feeling flesh and cartilege give under the impact, sensing that his own muscles were tiring under the pace he was forcing. He could hear Wade's labored breathing, and the steady thud, thud of the pounding fists.

After a while, he was too numb to react to Wade's blows. He only knew that he must end this before he was battered to unconsciousness. Around him everything was dark. His legs were turning liquid. There was a steady singing noise in his head, like telegraph wires in the wind.

He jumped back a pace, crouching. When he came up he leaned forward, trying to bring every muscle in his body into play. He swung at empty air and went reeling sideways. His head snapped as Wade hit the side of his jaw.

Gordon weaved back, throwing his left. He sensed where Wade must be, knew a brief moment of wild satisfaction as he realized he had connected. Wade was crumpling over him. Gordon stepped aside, out of Wade's way, letting the gunman fall. He heard a

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sound like a wet sack being dropped. But he had to brace his legs to keep from going down himself. Wiping a hand across his face, he felt the thick stickiness of blood, and his mouth was bone-dry. Every breath tore at his lungs.

He had to step over Wade's body; it was too far to go around it. He staggered over to his desk and fumbled for the lamp. Steadying himself against the chair, he found a match and lit the lamp. He held it up and looked at the figure on the floor.

Wade was flat on his back, breathing noisily. One arm was thrown out, and the hand was opening and closing spasmodically. Gordon guessed Eddie Wade would be out for some time. He figured that was the best he could have hoped for.

He went to the Chinaman's and ate rapidly because, although he knew he needed food, he wasn't hungry. The coffee was better; it was hot and comforting in his stomach. He had a second cup, sipping it and smoking a cigarette. When he had finished he walked back to his office.

Wade must have come to and left. There was only the fragments of broken glass on the stone floor as evidence of the fight. There was still no sign of Tab. Jim Gordon scribbled a short note to his deputy and left it where Tab would see it.

He supposed he had better see Landry and tell him to keep Wade out of his way. While he was sheriff, he wasn't going to be ordered around like a servant by Wade or even by Landry.

Riding up to the big house, he noticed how the folks along the board sidewalks turned and watched him. They knew by this time what had been happening. He could sense a tenseness in the air, an expectation of more to come, though there was nothing you could put your finger on. If he stopped and talked with these people, they would deny that they were waiting for trouble, yet the atmosphere was charged with suspense.

He pulled the bell at Landry's door violently. The house was brilliantly alight, every window blazing, but as first no one came to answer his ring. He tugged at the bell again and, for good measure, beat his fist on the door. Then the door was opened a crack.

"The sheriff to see Mr. Landry," he said.

"Solly," a high singsong voice answered from behind the door. "Mr. Landry not at home. Thank you very much."

It was Landry's servant, Chung Lo. Jim Gordon pushed the door in. "Reckon I'll have a look," he said.

Chung Lo waved his arms in protest. But he made no effort to hinder Gordon, who brushed past him and began climbing the carpeted stairs two at a time. The first room he entered was a large bedroom, evidently Landry's. There was a canopied bed, which was a disarray of twisted sheets and blankets. In one corner, over the back of a chair, hung a black string tie.

Jim Gordon stood inside the door, his eyes narrowed, taking in the picture. It was evident that Landry had left in a hurry. There was no point in searching the room any further. He turned to find Chung Lo standing just outside in the hall, rubbing his hands together, his head bowed as if in disgrace.

"Where's your boss?" Gordon demanded.

"Solly. Don't understand."

"You understand all right. Where did he go?"

The Chinaman shrugged and looked inscrutible.

Impatience needled Jim Gordon. He felt the anger rising in him, but he tried to keep it down. Chung Lo had been told not to talk, and he wouldn't.

"Where's Miss Landry?" he asked then. There was still no flicker of comprehension on Chung Lo's visage.

Gordon gave up. He went across the hall into another bedroom. It was where Bethe slept. He felt uncomfortable looking into it. There was a faint odor of perfume about, and the furnishings were so dainty he could hardly believe they were usable. There was another bedroom, bare and without character. He returned to the ground floor and checked the sitting room, the dining room, even the kitchen and pantry. Except for Chung Lo, the house was empty.

It made Jim Gordon jumpy to find it that way. It was wrong, somehow. Landry had been wounded. He should be there. It was like finding yourself in the middle of some

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alkali flat, not knowing which direction to take.

OUTSIDE, he flung himself on his tired gelding and headed the animal back toward town. He swung in before Labby's place. He could hear the tinkle of a piano, the shrill voice of a girl singing above the raucous uproar of voices. He slid out of his saddle and was tying the gelding to the hitching rack when another rider hauled up beside him.

"Been looking for you, Jim."

It was his foreman from Circle H. He seemed breathless.

"You've found me," Gordon said irritatedly.

"I looked at the jailhouse and over in the flats. Jim, there's been trouble out at Circle H. Some riders came in the east range and slaughtered half your herd. Mike and I heard the shooting, but when we got there it was all over. Whoever did it must have come and gone across Yellow Creek. We lost their sign, though Mike's still hunting. I figured I'd better let you know."

"Thanks," Gordon said.

He thought, that was the finish. He would never be in a position to pay back the bank on time now. And if Landry were in control of the bank—

He felt his shoulders sagging, and he wished he could feel more strongly about it, but he was squeezed dry of emotion. One more thing wrong didn't matter. Later, he figured, it would hit him hard; but now he couldn't feel it.

"Thanks for coming in," he said. "You'd better get back, in case there's more trouble. Tell Mike not to worry about hunting up sign. I'll attend to it when I can."

"You have an idea who did it?"

"I have a couple of ideas. One will be right."

In the light from the windows of Labby's place, he could see the disappointment in his foreman's expression. But this was tied up with the other things, he thought, with Steve Rae and Landry and the death of old Rowley. How, he didn't know. But he would find out.

He watched his foreman wheel his pony around and canter off. The piano inside Labby's had stopped. He crossed the board sidewalk to the batwings.

The saloon was still battered from the night before, although the broken mirror had been covered with sheets, and fresh sawdust was strewn on the floor. There was a good crowd strung out along the walnut bar. A few of Labby's girls mingled with the customers. The faro dealer was working quietly at one of the tables.

What interested Gordon was Landry's office clerk, sitting by himself at one table, his spectacles perched on the bridge of his nose. He was fingering a pink drink in a tall glass.

Jim Gordon went over to him. "I didn't figure you for a drinking man," he said in a friendly tone.

The clerk grimaced. "I'm not. I don't like it at all."

"So why do you come?" The girls?"

The clerk looked at him blankly for a moment. Then he said, "Wade told me Mr. Landry wanted to see me here. He said I should come over and order myself a drink."

"Do you know why?"

The clerk shook his head.

"How long ago did you see Wade?"

"An hour or so, maybe a little longer."

"And Mr. Landry hasn't showed?"

Again the clerk shook his head.

Labby wasn't behind the bar. Gordon spoke for a moment to his barman. He said Labby had been in his office all night.

Gordon knew the layout of Labby's place. At the far end of the saloon was a door that led into the back quarters. Here was a room where the girls dressed and waited when there weren't any customers. Another room was used by Labby as his office and living quarters. A hall separated them. There was an exit from the hall to the alleyway behind. Across the alley was a livery stable that wasn't being used any more. Landry owned it.

Gordon threaded his way through the tables and drinkers to the back of the saloon, pushed open the door, and stepped into the hallway. It was dark in there, but lights showed from under the door of the girls' dressing room. There was no light from Labby's office. Gordon tried the door to the

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office first and found it unlocked. Stepping inside, he was abruptly aware of the smell of gun smoke.

He felt for matches, found one, and scraped it into flame. In the flickering light he saw the body sprawled across the floor, and he knew this was Labby and that Labby was dead. He blew the match out and, feeling along the inside of the door, found the key and removed it from the lock. He went out, locked the door behind him, and dropped the key in his pocket.

As he stood in the darkened hall, he heard a rustle in the girls' dressing room. He knocked, waited a moment for an answer and then, getting none, pushed the door open.

A girl, sitting before the mirror hung above a dressing table littered with bottles and spilled powder, looked up and gave him a wide smile. Another girl was sitting with her back to him. She swung around slowly. It was Bethe Landry.

"Ah, Mr. Sheriff," she said languidly. "I just didn't imagine you were the type who would come bursting into the ladies' retiring room." Her eyes seemed to be mocking him.

"I have a reason."

The first girl had risen and moved over to the door. "I've got to get outside, Bethe," she said. "There are a lot of customers tonight."

GORDON ignored her. He was examining the red tightly-cut dress Bethe Landry was wearing. It was cheap and provocative, the sort of dress one of Labby's girls would wear. Her face was heavily made up.

"I came looking for your father," Gordon said bluntly. "I thought he might be here at Labby's."

"My father's home in bed. He was wounded here last night—or wouldn't the sheriff remember that?"

"I remember." He wondered if he should tell her she was wrong about her father, that he wasn't home. He decided he wouldn't.

"So you came to the room where the girls change their costumes. I suppose being sheriff gives you the right."

"Maybe I wanted to see you," he told her. He saw the flush creep into her cheeks, even behind the heavy coat of powder. But she swung her legs and said brazenly, "Why shouldn't I have some fun? This is a man's world, here in Yellow River. The women are worn down with drudgery; they have no lives of their own. I want a good time; I'm used to a good time. It's only these girls at Labby's who know how to live. So I'm friends with them. It makes me feel like a woman."

"And the customers?"

"Are you interested?" She was smiling at him—mocking him again, he thought. She jumped off the trunk and came over, standing so close he could feel the warmth of her body.

"I said, are you interested? I have my price."

He didn't answer. He was thinking of Jeannie Rae. She was no drudge; she had her life. It was hard, but it was satisfying. She would be happy with her man some day, and they would build things a little better than they had found them, for the children they would have.

"Well, I'm waiting." Bethe looked up at him under curling lashes.

Her nearness was making the blood run hot in his veins. Bethe Landry had stirred the animal in him, and he wondered momentarily how it would be, to taste her lips and feel her body against his.

"The price would be too high," he said then, and stepped away.

Her lips drew tight for a moment, but the anger seemed to pass instantly.

"For you, there's no cost."

"The price is still too high," he told her.

She drew in her breath hard. Her hand flashed as it struck out and slapped him across the face. He hardly felt the sting. Then suddenly she was clinging to him, sobbing.

"Oh, Jim," she managed to say, "I'm not this way really. I don't have any customers. I'm just lonely, and these girls are my friends. This isn't even my dress; it's one I borrowed. But I'm in love with you. I want you so much, and you won't even notice me."

He found himself believing her. "I'm sorry," he said gently. "But it can't be, Bethe."

She had moved a little away and was drying her eyes. Her features seemed to have

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softened. The powder on her cheeks was smeared.

"That other girl—" she said. "I was afraid of that."

"There's no other girl now."

"My father, then. You hate him like everyone else in this town does."

"No, not your father."

She was watching him eagerly, wanting him to say something that would give her hope. "There must be a reason, then."

"Let's leave it I just don't care enough."

Gordon made her promise to stay with the girls at Labby's until he told her she could go home. It would be safer here, he thought. Then he closed the door behind him, shutting Bethe out of his mind at the same time.

Back in the saloon, Jim Gordon let his eyes shuttle around the room. Landry's clerk was gone, the tall glass of pink liquid still on the table where he had been sitting. The group around the faro table was larger, more intense. The crowd about the bar had thinned out. In a corner, two drunken miners were arguing about who should take the next drink out of the bottle a third was holding.

Gordon went over to the bar and beckoned to the man behind it. He dropped the key to Labby's office on the bar top.

"Was Labby in any trouble?" Gordon asked.

He watched the expression on the barman's face. He had worked for Labby a long time. The barman's jaw was slowly dropping. "What do you mean, Sheriff?" he asked slowly.

"Labby's dead. Why did anyone want to kill him?"

The barman put his hands down flat on the surface of the bar. He stared at Gordon blankly. After a while he said, "Labby was square. Nobody'd want to kill him."

Gordon said, "Last night Labby was complaining he couldn't make any money. But his place was always busy. What about that?"

The barman looked as though he wanted to say something, but then he thought better of it. "As far as I know, Labby did all right. But I'm just a hired man."

Jim Gordon pointed to the key. "Your boss is in his office. You'd better close up."

HE TURNED, leaving the barman staring off into space. He heard the batwings flap and, glancing over, saw Ed Landry coming in. He was walking heavily, heading for the bar. His clothes had been thrown on him, and his face was gray. He moved awkwardly, favoring his shoulder.

Gordon advanced toward him. "You'd better clear out of here, Landry," he said. "Men are out looking for you."

He thought for a moment that Landry was drunk. He stood swaying, his eyes bloodshot. "I want Wade," Landry said.

"He isn't here. Wade can't help you now; it's too late. Get out of town fast, Landry."

"This is my town. I'm not leaving."

"Then I'll lock you up. You'll be safe in the jailhouse."

Ed Landry glared. "No one's locking Ed Landry up. I can look after myself."

"Have it that way, if you want," Gordon said. "I can't force you. But it's my job to keep peace."

"I like you," Landry said then. His voice was getting thicker. "I want you working for me."

"I work for myself," Gordon answered.

Ed Landry gave a grunt. "I'll find Wade," he said. "We don't fear anyone."

He turned and was heading for the batwings, his whole body shaking as he moved.

Jim Gordon watched the doors flapping behind him. He thought, I should rig up a charge against Landry and lock him up until the hate against him has a chance to cool down. But something about the man stopped him—his massive pride, perhaps. Jim Gordon thought Landry would rather die than give up his pride. You had to admire a man for that.

Gordon had hesitated a moment too long. When he pushed his way outside after Landry, the man had disappeared. He searched the area, questioned everyone he met, but after fifteen minutes he had to give up. It was as if Landry had vanished into the air.

Going back into the saloon, he found the barman trying to get the patrons to leave. He wasn't making any progress. Jim Gordon went over to the rear door and stepped again into the dark hallway, deciding that his first

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job was to find, if he could, some trace of Labby's killer.

He passed the girls' dressing room, hearing the shrill chatter of voices inside, passed the locked door of Labby's office, and went out into the alley behind.

The moon was up. He cound make out the trampled tracks of boots converging on the back doorway to Labby's place. Many men had come and gone by that door. He moved a little way out into the alley. Tracks led off in both directions. A few crossed the alley to the deserted livery stable.

He paused, trying to read some meaning into what he saw. It didn't mean much, except that probably whoever had killed Labby had entered from the alley. It would, he guessed, be futile to go back to the saloon and ask questions. Even the sound of the shot had probably not been heard there.

The prints leading toward the livery stable interested him. Some suggested a curious scuffing walk, like that of a lame man. He followed them up to the entrance, which was locked with an old padlock. The wood in which the hasps were imbedded was half rotten. He gave a tug and the hasp came loose.

It was then he heard a horse coming down the alley and he swung around, his hand going toward his Colt. The rider had evidently seen him. He hauled up short, his pony's shoes sliding in the dirt. It was Tab. He scrambled to the ground. His pony's flanks were heaving.

He said hoarsely, "Wade and some of Landry's men picked up Steve Rae. We tracked them back into town and then lost them."

"We?" Gordon asked. "Who's we?"

"There's no time to explain now," Tab said. He seemed unusually excited. "I'd better take you back to the men so you can set things up."

"My pony's outside of Labby's," Gordon said. "I'll meet you at the office."

Tab was waiting before the sheriff's office. He hadn't dismounted. "You come with me," he said, and kicked his pony forward.

He was riding toward Landry's house, Gordon realized after a few minutes. But abruptly Tab cut off the rutted street, taking a trail that led up into the hills. He was riding fast, as if his life depended on it.

Even with the moonlight to guide him, Gordon had to check his gelding's pace. It was a rocky, seldom used trail, leading to a silver mine up in the hills that had long since run out of ore. He caught then the flicker of a fire between the brush, and then he almost ran Tab down, because Tab had halted and was blocking the trail.

"In there," he said.

His tone was strange. He pointed at an opening at the side of the trail, an almost impassable path through the brush.

"Give me the pitch, Tab," Gordon said.

"You'll get it. I'll be right behind."

FOR a moment Gordon hesitated. He didn't understand this, didn't like it. But he had no reason to doubt his deputy. Gordon reined around and started down the path, then pulled his pony up.

"This doesn't make sense," he said slowly. From where he was then, there was no longer any sign of the fire.

"It makes sense, Sheriff. Do as I say. I have a gun on you."

"Tab!"

"Go on. I'm not figuring on hurting you, I just want to be sure. You'd better keep your hands high so I can see you're not holding anything."

Gordon pushed on through the bushes. Low branches slapped at his face. Once the gelding stumbled on a boulder. After a short way, he came out into a sunken clearing. A group of men were hunched around a small fire. At his approach, they turned to face him. A little way off there was a solitary cottonwood tree, its branches cutting a dark pattern against the moon. Gordon saw the rope hanging from it. It swayed gently in the night breeze. The lower end was knotted into noose.

"Don't get your sweat up," Tab said. "That rope's for Landry."

Gordon was close to the men now. He could make out their shapes, note a telltale feature here and there in the firelight.

"I see it now," he said slowly.

"Toss your gun on the ground and come off your saddle," Tab said.

Gordon did as he was told, there was nothing else he could do. The men closed in

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around him and pushed him toward the fire. They waited until Tab joined them, then Sanders told Gordon to sit down. He himself remained standing. Gordon noticed Hank Rae standing a little apart from the others. He was staring up into the sky.

"Guess you've heard, Sheriff," Sanders began, speaking in a slow solemn way. "Landry's men picked up Steve Rae. We have an idea they're holding him at Landry's house, and we're going there to get him. We're going to get Landry, too. We have the rope all ready."

Gordon jumped to his feet and said, "That's lynching, Sanders. Every man here would have to answer to the law for that."

"The law," Sanders spat the word out. "What has it done about Landry? It's protected him only—so he could buy up half the area, rob us of our range and businesses, even murder."

"Old Rowley shot himself."

"Landry drove him to it. And what about the way he foreclosed on the widow O'Rourke, knowing there was silver in her hills? What about your cows that were killed today? We know about that. These are just a few things; there are many more."

"Nothing's been proved. You can't string a man up on suspicion."

"We talk too much," Hank Rae cut in impatiently. "We waste time."

Sanders glanced in Rae's direction, then back at Gordon.

"Hank's right. We sent Tab for you for one reason. Awhile back we told you you had to take sides. The time has come. We want you with us. Your man, Tab, says you're not for Landry."

"I'm no one's man," Gordon said. "I represent you all, Landry included."

"I told you," some said. "He's with Landry."

Tab suddenly stepped forward.

"Why would Landry slaughter the sheriff's beef if he were working for Landry?"

"Maybe Landry wanted to make sure of him," the same voice accused. "He'd know Gordon couldn't pay off the bank without beef. He might have thought Gordon would try to cross him."

There was a gruff murmur of agreement. When it died down, Sanders said, "You heard about that, Gordon. What do you say?"

"I've told you. I'm not Landry's man, I'm not your man. I'm sheriff. I do the best job I can."

Sanders said patiently, "It's like this, Gordon. We'd rather have you on our side. Tab asked us to give you the chance, and so did Jeannie Rae. So you have it."

"Tab isn't deputy any more. He doesn't have a right to the badge any longer."

"I guess that's your answer," Sanders said. He sounded regretful.

"It's my answer."

There was a moment of stillness. A log on the fire crackled, and the leaves of the cottonwood rustled softly. Otherwise there was no sound.

"It's time we moved," Hank Rae said. "It's my boy that Landry's holding."

And then Tab, close by Gordon now, said, "I'm sorry, boss. I didn't figure it would end this way."

Gordon hadn't known Jeannie Rae was there until Sanders and Tab had bound his arms behind him tying the rawhide so tight it cut into his flesh, and lashed his legs together, leaving him lying on the ground helpless. Then she was there, arguing with Sanders, saying how she hated Jim Gordon for the hardness that was in him.

She would stay behind and guard him, she said, because she could do that while the men rode into town to accomplish their purpose. It would make her feel she had helped. After a little while, Sanders agreed.

NOW she sat on a boulder, a few yards away from him, the rifle she had once used to keep him from her brother resting across her knees. She had a dark shawl around her shoulders to keep out the coldness of the night. She stared at Gordon silently, her face like something carved out of stone.

The men had gone, riding off in a silent, determined string. Gordon's arms ached, and his legs were numb from lack of circulation. The coldness was seeping into him, creeping slowly through his flesh.

He rolled over on his back. The stars were

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thick overhead, soft and glistening against a sky made mellow by the moon. He had been wrong, perhaps. How did one know? Had he made too much of the law book and too little of the spirit behind the law? You had to act as you thought best. Perhaps there was a full and satisfactory answer to what was right.

He twisted again, the rawhide biting into his wrists at his movement. He cursed under his breath, not at the pain, but at his own helplessness. Jeannie was calling his name softly. He slithered around so that he could see her as she sat on the boulder. She was leaning forward, the rifle still across her knees.

"Jim, you were right about Steve," she said. "It would have been better for you to have taken him in. There's no telling what Landry will do to him."

"We all make mistakes," he said. "But we don't have to make them more than once."

He heard her deep sigh. "It's this time that counts about Steve. That wound in his leg wasn't good. There wasn't time to look after it right. Even if Landry spares him, the wound may give trouble."

Jim Gordon felt his muscles suddenly strain against his bonds. The pulse in his temple began to throb. He should have figured it out sooner, should have matched the scuffling footprints in the dust of the alley behind Labby's with Steve Rae's wounded leg.

He said roughly, "Get me untied, Jeannie."

She was suddenly alert. The rifle came up to her shoulder.

"I'm not making talk," he went on, hurriedly now that the urgency of it was clear to him. "Your friends aren't going to find Steve at Landry's house. But I know where your brother is."

"I'm not being made a fool of, Jim," she answered coldly. "I'm here to see you don't get away. You won't."

Impatience made him anrgy. "It may mean Steve's life, Jeannie. I saw tracks in front of the unused livery back of Labby's place. They were made by a man who dragged his right leg. Landry owns that livery. It would be a handy place to hide someone out. If Tab hadn't come to bring me here, I'd have checked long ago."

She had let the rifle fall to her side. She left the boulder and came over to where he was lying. "Why should I believe you, Jim? It could be a trick."

"You'll have to take that chance."

She stood above him, her features taut and drawn. "You want to warn Landry."

"I want first to save your brother, if it isn't too late. Landry will be answering a lot of questions when his time comes. But Landry can wait. Now, cut these damn bonds."

Still she hesitated for a brief moment. "If you're lying to me, Jim Gordon—"

"I've never lied to you."

Then she was on her knees, working at the knots on his wrists. He lay face down on the ground while she worked, feeling her heavy breathing close by his ears, her fingers moving with sure agility. When his hands were free, they both worked to strip the bonds from his legs. He himself was clumsy, his arms still numb and aching.

Then he was on his feet and running over to where he gelding was tethered. They had left it saddled. He tore the halter loose, tested the cinch, and swung up. Only then he realized that Jeannie also was mounting her pony.

"This is man's work," he called to her. "You're to stay here."

"You're my prisoner, Jim Gordon. If this is a trick, you know what will happen."

He knew, from her tone, that he couldn't sway her. He raked the gelding's flanks lightly with his rowels, and it took off with driving hoofs.

He saw the blaze against the night sky long before he turned from the trail toward town. It came from where Landry's house stood on the rise. He guessed what had happened. The seekers of vengeance had not found Landry or Steve at the big white house, so they had set a torch to it. Now they would be riding elsewhere, searching for their prey. Gordon hoped he would find it first.

JEANNIE was dropping behind now. But she would know where he was heading. He came into town, and swerved to avoid a carriage that was moving placidly through the plaza. He cut in between the false fronts

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and brought the gelding around into the alley that ran behind Labby's place. He was sliding out of the saddle before his pony came up to the deserted livery stable.

The hasp was still dangling, as it had been when he ripped it loose. Gordon slipped out his Colt and pulled the door to the livery open. He stepped inside and threw himself up against the wall. For a moment he waited there, scarcely breathing, his senses sharpened for any sound.

He smelled rotting wood, mingled with the odor of mildewed hay. It was too dark to see anything clearly. What little moonlight seeped in the door was lost in the cavernous darkness within.

Then he detected a faint creak, as if someone had taken a step on a loose floorboard. It came from the far interior of the livery.

He hauled off his boots and took a step into the darkness. At that moment he heard a horse draw up outside. He turned, thumbing back the hammer of his gun. Jeannie was suddenly framed in the doorway.

He went over to her, moving silently on stockinged feet, and whispered, urgently for her to go into Labby's by the rear door and wait for him in the girl's dressing room. He did not remain for her answer. He started back in the direction from which he had heard the sound.

He covered a few yards when he heard it again, followed by a soft moan. By now his eyes were getting accustomed to the blackness. But he had to move slowly, one arm outstretched to warn him of any obstacle that might be in his path. He remembered dimly the layout of the livery, from the days when it had been in use. He felt sure the sound had come from one of the rear stalls, and that in it he would find Steve Rae. What else he would find, he didn't know.

Again there was a soft moan, very close now, to his sharp left. That was where the stalls would be. He stood stock still a moment, waiting for any other sound that might help him. He thought he heard a man's breathing, but he couldn't be sure.

There was a good chance that someone was there, guarding Steve in the darkness—someone who was aware of his approach, because he could hardly have opened the livery door and come inside without giving himself away. Yet there was no evidence of it. If any one were awaiting him, he was holding his peace until Gordon would be almost upon him.

Gordon raised his Colt, pointing it toward the roof, and triggered. At the same moment he threw himself sideways. The explosion reverberated, echoing back from the walls. Above him, wood splintered. He had seen nothing in the momentary flash of light except the dark mouths of the stalls.

Wood creaked again and he heard a muffled cry, as if someone were trying to scream through a gagged mouth. No gun answered his invitation. He felt in his pocket with his free hand, and risked lowering his gun while he pushed open the box and took out a half-dozen matches. He stuck these between his teeth, keeping only one, which he scraped against his levis.

He moved rapidly then, advancing toward the stalls. He saw first the reflected flicker of matchlight on the glass of the spectacles.

He said, out of the corner of his mouth, "I have my gun on you, man. Don't move."

The match had burned to his fingers. He dropped it and lit another. He had come in closer. Landry's clerk was standing staring at him. He had a gun in his hand, but it was dangling at his side. On the floor of the stall was the dark hulk of a prone figure.

"I was supposed to shoot," the clerk said, his voice thin and high. "No one ever asked me if I knew how. And I didn't dare to let on I had never learned."

"Is Steve Rae all right?"

"He's bad, Sheriff. They were trying to make him tell them things."

"Who was?"

"Mr. Landry and Mr. Wade. It was awful."

"What kind of things?"

"Things like who was out after Landry, and where they were. I didn't want any part of it, but they made me stay. Then they gave me this gun and told me to watch this man and shoot anyone who came in."

"Well, help me get Rae out, and someday I'll teach you how to shoot. It may come in handy."

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"I need my job with Landry. My mother, back home, is sick. Otherwise I wouldn't work for him."

Gordon was bending over Steve. His hand found Rae's burning forehead, and he listened a moment to the almost inaudible breathing. The kid was in a bad way.

He reached under the inert body and lifted it gently.

"Come on, man," he said. "You take the legs. This kid needs attention fast."

The clerk shuffled in the darkness. "Where are you?" he asked timidly.

"Feel your way," Gordon said.

"I'm afraid of shooting," the clerk said then, as if to himself.

"Get busy." Gordon found his patience leaving him fast. "As I said—"

He didn't finish. The butt of a gun seemed to split his skull apart as it came crashing down. He felt himself falling, and although he tried to prevent it, he knew he couldn't. There was confusion around him, and then for one vivid moment he could take in everything.

There was Jeannie, her eyes wild with terror. Just a step behind her was Wade, holding his .45 by the barrel, and Bethe Landry, and Labby's barman, carrying a lantern. The picture blurred, running all together, becoming wet streaks of wavy color that gradually blacked out altogether.

HIS head was a shooting pain that sent nauseau through him. The lantern light seared his eyeballs. Eddie Wade had tossed water in his face, and it had run down over his shirt. Jim Gordon clenched his fists tight.

He said, "I'm not selling out to anyone, least of all Landry."

Wade reached out sharply. His hand snapped hard against the side of Gordon's jaw. Gordon had to clamp his teeth together. He moved a leg, kicking at the old straw on the stall floor. The others had gone. Only Wade was there in the stall, with the lantern set on the floor. He had tied Gordon to a post.

"You like your spread," Wade said. "Myself, I wouldn't care, but Landry says he wants you working for him. I reckon it's his daughter who talked him into it. Anyway, you can't pay off to the bank. Landry says to tell you he'll give you more time, so long as you work for him."

"I'm not selling out," Gordon repeated.

"We got the Rae girl," Wade said. "Maybe if you were to see her strung up beside you, you might decide playing with Landry was better after all. How about that, Sheriff?"

"Don't try it," Gordon said tonelessly.

Wade grinned. "The way I look at it, you should try anything once. It might work."

There was the click of shoes running across the floor as Wade was saying that. Then Bethe Landry appeared behind him. She was wearing levis and a red silk shirt. There was no look of glamour about her now.

"Wade," she said, her voice tight and strained, "some men came and took my father. They started off with him into the hills."

The gunman stared at her for an instant. Then he turned to Gordon. "What do you know about that?" he asked.

"What you're thinking. It's a lynching. You'd better let me go after them before it's too late.

He saw Wade grin. "You can save him?" he asked. His eyes had taken on a bright glitter.

"I can try."

"Sure, if I let you. Miss Landry, you'd better get out of here."

"Do something, Wade," she said, her tone abruptly imperious. "Do something fast."

He was reaching for his sack of tobacco. "Why?" he asked. "With your old man out of the way, that leaves things clear. I'm a little tired of working for wages. I wouldn't mind a hunk of the big money myself."

Bethe Landry was staring at him as if frozen.

"Well, don't look so high and mighty," he went on. "You can cut in on it, too. I've been looking at you ever since you come back from the East. You just be nice to me."

She still did not move. Her cheeks were dead white. Her lips had become a thin line. The horror was a terrible thing in her eyes.

Wade had forgotten Jim Gordon. He was bragging to Bethe, now, trying to make her want him. "Don't think I haven't done all right till now," he went on. "Your old man didn't see a lot that went on around him. He

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wanted money and power, but he didn't want it the way I do. He was too soft. Folks thought he was hard, but it was mostly me that did his dirty work for him. And most of the time he didn't even know.

"Like Labby, tonight. Labby said he couldn't pay up, like he's said before. So I got rid of him, and we move in and run his joint. Your old man was only interested in building a big house and the town hall, and he'd never have gotten where he did except for me.

"Why, he would have let that Rowley have another couple of months to pay his debts. Only I knew if he let Rowley have it, everyone else would be looking for the same thing. So I gave Rowley another message."

"You're a beast." Bethe spat the words.

"I got a bit more than my wages out of it—enough for us to live on comfortably the rest of our lives, if you want. We could go to Frisco, St. Louis—even New York."

Bethe turned away. She started to leave. Wade dropped the makings of his cigarette and grabbed her hand, spinning her around. He started to draw her to him. She was struggling, screaming now, clawing at Wade with her nails.

To Jim Gordon, it seemed that he was watching a nightmare. He had known, from what Bethe had said about her father, that he must reach the clearing with the cottonwood before the angry men had a chance to finish the task they had set themselves.

He had begun struggling with the rope that was tying him to the post. And then, as Wade was talking, he had found himself forgetting everything else, amazed at the naked revelations of the man, of the evil that he was bragging about.

Now, as Bethe struggled, he realized that time was running out on him, that his job was more important than ever. He was responsible for justice, for saving Landry and bringing retribution to Eddie Wade.

Gordon was fighting to get free now, while the sweat came out over him. His head throbbed, his arms wrenched in the shoulder sockets, but he was getting nowhere. Then he remembered the lantern on the floor near his leg.

WADE was still trying to subdue Bethe. His arms were coiled about her. The lantern was just beyond the reach of Jim Gordon's swinging leg. He tried again, straining at his post. He felt something give in his arm. It was suddenly numb. But he had come closer that time, within a fraction of an inch of the lantern. If he had had his boots on, he would have made it.

But Bethe, still strugging, had seen over Wade's shoulder what he was trying to do. Gordon saw the comprehension come into her eyes. As he swung again, she had twisted sideways and in doing so, pushed the lantern a trifle closer to him. It went over, spilling coal oil over the dry hay on the stall floor. And then, with a *whish*, the straw was suddenly alight.

Wade didn't understand for a moment. The flaring flame caught him unawares. But as the crackling became louder, he let go of Bethe and turned around to see what was happening.

At that moment, Bethe reached for Wade's holster. She slid out his gun, snapping back the hammer. She was pointing the .45 at Wade as he turned away from the fire and started for her again.

Wade acted like a man stunned. He stopped dead in his tracks. His eyes were cold and bitter. She crowded him over to Gordon, kept the .45 steady as, at her direction, he unfastened the rope holding Gordon to the post.

By then the flames were licking up the walls of the stall, eating at the old dried-out wood. The heat was searing Gordon's face as the ropes dropped free. He ran over to Bethe.

"Better give me the gun," he said. "I've got some fast riding to do."

"You're not riding any place," Wade said.

He had moved in close to them. There was a tiny derringer in his hand. Firelight danced in his hard black eyes. He triggered as Jim Gordon dived at him. Gordon felt the sliver of pain as the derringer's lead sliced his shoulder, then the jarring shock as their bodies collided.

He realized that the impact had carried Wade to the ground. They were rolling over, the heat from the fire close and intense.

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Wade still had the derringer. As Gordon came on top, he reached out and grabbed Wade's gun hand.

There was little strength in him. His whole body felt as if it were burning, and his muscles were flacid, like rubber that has been stretched too much. But he had Wade's wrist, and he told himself that he had to find the strength in himself somewhere, before the flames that were crackling all around could reach them.

He leaned forward and twisted the wrist. The effort made his head swim. He kept at it, watching the glint of fire on the tiny gun barrel.

It took a long time, longer than he would ever have imagined it could take. Then the gun came free. Beneath him, Wade was squirming, and he wouldn't be able to hold Wade there much longer. So he stood up, pulling Wade up after him. Flames were licking at the straw under his feet. They would have to get out or be burned. He began pushing Wade ahead of him toward the livery door.

Bethe was following them, saying in a strained voice, "I couldn't shoot because I was afraid I'd hit you by mistake."

"What about Steve?" Gordon asked. He kept right behind Eddie Wade.

"We moved him over to the back of Labby's place," Bethe said. "His sister and the girls are with him. We went for the doctor."

"Stay with them," Gordon asid. "I'll be back."

He shoved Wade out into the alley, taking the .45 from Bethe. He kept it trained on Wade's back. It was good to be outside, to feel the fresh light air on his burning face. He heard, from not too far away, the shout of running men, drawn by the fire that was now shooting up through the roof of the empty livery.

Bethe started to cross the alley, they hesitated. "My father," she cried, as if she had only just remembered.

"I'll be bringing him back." He hoped that was true.

Wade had been standing, waiting. He must have sensed Gordon's momentary distraction, because he was suddenly racing across the alley, zigzagging for the corner of a building. Jim Gordon leveled the Colt and emptied it.

Wade pitched forward into the dirt, sliding as he hit. He tried to get up. His hands clawed at the dust.

Jim Gordon said tensely, "It would have been easier to kill you."

IT WAS a ride that seemed to have no end. Gordon's head was light, as if he were on the verge of delirium. He seemed to exist apart from his body, which swayed effortlessly to his gelding's smooth stride.

He could not drive the animal as fast as he wanted. The body lashed across the saddle in front of him made the load too heavy for great speed. He overshot the turnoff from the trail. But he turned back, found it, and pushed on through the brush. Branches slashed at his face, but he no longer felt any pain.

It seemed to take a long time to reach the clearing, but he was there at last. He drove the tired gelding into a spurt of renewed speed as he charged over the uneven ground. There were twenty or more men now, circled about the lone tree. Gordon could make out dimly the hulking figure standing on the tail of a wagon. The rope cut a sharp line against the pale sky.

Pounding hoofs drew attention away from the man waiting his end. Someone cried out Gordon's name as he sawed at the reins, bringing the gelding to a sliding halt. He saw a gun coming up to a shoulder, heard the crescendo of angry voices, and knew that his own time was very short.

He yanked at his Colt, slid it free, and tossed it in a low arc toward the men who were beginning to press toward him. Then he cupped his hands about his mouth. His words seemed to tear at his throat.

"You can take me anv time you want. But first let me talk to Tab."

At his shouting, the uproar had died down. It began again, a mounting undercurrent that swelled up to him like music gone mad. Jim Gordon sat rigid in his saddle. Slowly he raised his arms over his head, to show he intended no trickery.

One voice shouted something above the

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confusion of noise. A man broke from the group and came at him on the run. Gordon recognized Tab's loping stride, but he was too exhausted to feel relief.

He wanted to let his arms fall. They were growing far too heavy, and his brain was beginning to swirl again, awash with vague unrealities that made no sense. He had to concentrate, to force himself to keep his wits until Tab reached him. It seemed to be taking a long time.

But Gordon was aware, after a while, that Tab had reached him and was standing there, his hand on the gelding's bridle. Jim Gordon leaned over, holding the saddlehorn with one hand to keep from pitching off.

He whispered hoarsely, "Pin your badge on, Tab. You have to take over now."

And then, as he heard Tab grunt, he tried to go on. "Wade will talk, Tab. You can make him talk. You can make these men listen. Before the rope snaps, they have to listen to Wade. Give the law its chance."

He wanted to say more, but his breath was too short. He slumped forward. He stayed that way, aware only dimly of what went on about him as a red morning sun climbed higher, spilling its glow over the scene.

Someone untied Wade, lifted him down, and carried him a little way off. He was hidden from Gordon now by the knot of men gathered around him. And there were voices, rough, angry voices, but Jim Gordon only heard their sound, not the words.

After a while he looked up, over at the cottonwood, and saw the rope still dangling and the wagon still standing under it. But Landry was no longer there. A brief moment of excitement flooded through Jim Gordon, but it passed quickly, because he was too weary to hold it. The sun was a blood red disk, climbing hirgher into the heavens. Then Tab was beside him again, helping him off the gelding.

"He's dead, Jim," Tab said. "But he talked some—enough. You'd better get some rest."

Jim Gordon tried to grin. His lips were stiff. "He lived long enough, then," he managed to say. "You wearing your badge again, Tab?"

"You asked me to."

"Yeah. Wear it right, Tab. I'm going back to my rangeland, where I belong. I found what I wanted."

"What was that, boss? What was it you wanted?"

"A little piece of justice, Tab. I wanted to know it was more than a nice sounding word."

HE CAME out of Ed Landry's office feeling better. The bank would extend his loan, a year, maybe more if he needed it. But a year would be enough if he worked hard. His range was good range, and he still had more than half his cows left.

Ed Landry had seemed deflated, but he had talked to Jim Gordon about building a new school. He'd put up most of the money himself. He wanted to call it the Gordon School. Jim said it was all right as long as Landry was having it named after his father.

"See that picture," Landry had said then, pointing to the portrait of the young man, still hanging crookedly on the wall. "That was when I was still wet behind the ears. I wanted a lot of money; I wanted to run things I got my way. But I was still wet behind the ears. I trusted the wrong men, people like Wade. It will be different now. And I find I'm not so interested in being the big wheel any more. Reckon I'm getting old."

Then he had reached in his drawer and pulled out a half-filled bottle. This time Jim Gordon drank with him. Going out of the office, Gordon saw the clerk look up from his scribbling.

He said, "I promised to teach you to shoot. When do we start?"

The clerk laid down his pen. He adjusted his spectacles, pushing them up from the bridge of his nose. "I don't have much hankering to learn shooting," he said with a shy smile. "Besides, it might have a bad effect on my writing hand if I were to get used to a gun. I'd just as soon be a clerk. It's safer."

"Then maybe I'll get you to teach me how to write good," Gordon said.

He went out into the afternoon sunlight. The board sidewalk was crowded. He walked along it, nodding to the people he passed.

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He was thinking, I might as well ride home by way of the Rae ranch. He hadn't been over for two days, and Jeannie might be getting anxious.

Tab rode by, the badge glistening in the sun. He didn't see Jim Gordon. He was making for the flats, to check the saloons there. He was becoming a good sheriff. Some of the fever for action had gone out of him since that day when he had wanted to string up Ed Landry. He knew what he was doing now; he understood what working for the law meant.

Jim Gordon came up to Labby's, and it was there he found himself suddenly face to face with Bethe Landry. He had seen her only once since the morning he had brought her father back to her, and then there had been no time to talk. Now, as he raised his hat and was about to pass her, she laid her hand on his arm.

"I never really thanked you," she said.

"You don't have to. I was doing my job."

Her lips were smiling just a trifle. "You took your job mighty seriously, Jim Gordon. I only wish you could take me that way."

He felt awkward, didn't know what to say. Her deep eyes were suddenly serious. "I shouldn't have said that, Jim. I didn't mean to. I'll be seeing you some time."

She was gone then, a trim figure, hurrying down the board sidewalk, lost after a few moments in the eddy of people.

It was late afternoon when he reached the Rae spread. Jeannie saw him ride up, and she ran over to greet him as he dismounted. He set the black gelding to graze, and then they were walking, hand in hand, out over the dry bunch-grass toward the setting sun.

Steve, riding in from the range, waved at them in greeting as he passed. He still sat his saddle stiffly, because the wound in his leg wasn't fully healed yet. He rode on, leaving them alone, the way they wanted to be.

They walked, neither speaking because there seemed to be no need of words between them, while the twilight settled around them. But when they finally turned back, Jim Gordon said, "It will be a year, Jeannie, before I'll be in a position to bring you to my place. A year can be a long time."

She moved in very close to him, so close he could smell her fragrance. He felt the need of her building up within him, the wonder of her singing through his whole being.

"Does it have to be that long," she asked. "Perhaps it's this year that you will need me most."

"But there'll be a great deal of work, and no money. It wouldn't be right to ask you to come any sooner."

"Then I will ask you," she said quietly, "because a year is a long time. We're young and not afraid to do the best with what we have."

Her arms were suddenly around his neck. He bent over, finding her lips. They were sure and warm against his. They would do all right with what they had, he thought. Together they would do all right.

RUSTLING WITHIN THE LAW

RUSTLING, in a roundabout way, was condoned by law in early-day Montana. At least, in the statutes, rustling was not designated as a criminal offense. This law of 1877, involving what is known as "customary-range," said an owner might recover three times the value of the cattle branded.

"Customary range" was a term used in reference to private cattle outfits using public domain—and meant, literally, the place where a cattleman usually ran his stock after making such an announcement in the papers. If newcomers pushed into the area, they could be imprisoned and fined.

The law became so involved, however, in courts, the cattlemen took matters into their own hands in a manner representative of the present century. They boycotted intruding outfits at roundup time, refusing to allow them to participate!

——Ferris Weddle

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Let the Flag

The chorus of "Dixie" wafted back to the watchers on the island

JARBONE DRAKE FOUND an island paradise, with no women . . .

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Fly Free

By TODHUNTER BALLARD

JARBONE DRAKE held a very sorry opinion of women. He had not known many, and those he had come into contact with during the war years had been mostly scrubs and trouble-makers.

He was a tall, lean man in his early twenties with a hawk-thin face and dark steady eyes which could at times be biting cold. A disillusioned man, weary from war, he had come home to Texas with nothing but a horse, a rope and a gun.

He was not dishonest, according to his own lights. It would never occur to him to take money from another's pocket, nor to attempt to deal a card from the bottom of a deck. But it hurt his soul to see a calf without a brand, and he generally remedied the oversight as soon as he could build a brief fire to heat his running iron.

Such independence of philosophy kept him in motion, and in two years he had drifted nearly the breadth of the wide state, usually with someone following him. At first he rode alone, since he never lingered in one locality long enough to form attachments. So he was mildly surprised when Juan Rodriguez chose to throw in his lot with Drake.

Rodriguez was an *hidalgo,* well educated, who had dipped deeply into both literature and wine, and who never troubled to explain why he, who might have graced the court of Spain, was riding aimlessly about the Texas wastes. Nor did it come to Jarbone Drake's mind to ask. In the society they occupied, questions were impolite.

They found themselves this dark night riding stirrup to stirrup westward as rapidly as their fresh horses could carry them. Behind lay a gambler who had been too fast with a card and too slow with his gun. A woman had been the trouble, since she had inveigled the impressionable Rodriguez into the game.

On their trail was an aroused group of citizens who had constituted themselves a posse without due process of law. They were eating Jarbone's dust and cursing the impulsiveness which had led them to listen

but in his moment of danger, only a woman could save him from death

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to the wailings of the dead gambler's woman.

Jarbone was not afraid, but he was annoyed. "As I have remarked before," he said above the dull thud of the running hoofs, "women are the source of evil, and I'm tired of being constantly on the run. I'm going to stop and put down some roots, where there are no women."

"So?" said Rodriguez, through the darkness. "And where will you find such a place?"

Jarbone had been giving this his consideration. "I'm thinking of Mexico."

Rodriguez's tone was regretful. "That," he said in his soft voice, "would mean that we part. It is not good for my health to cross the river."

Jarbone pondered. "You are not welcome in your own country?"

"No more than you are welcome here, after tonight's shooting?"

It saddened Jarbone that he must lose his only friend, but Texas was really getting a mite hot. "So be it," he said. "However, ride with me as far as the border."

They rode all night and half the next day, coming at last to the stream which served as boundary between their two countries.

Now that he had safety before him, Jarbone was in no hurry to cross, postulating correctly that the posse had long since given up the chase. He sat, one leg eased around the horn, and gazed thoughtfully up and down the shore. Rodriguez had nothing to say. With the actual parting at hand, he was nearly overcome with emotion. He watched Jarbone stiffen, and swung his attention up stream, at the same time letting his hand fall to his belted gun.

"What do you see?"

Jarbone spoke slowly. "Juan, is that an island at the far curve?"

Juan looked. Jarbone put his horse in motion. "Let's see."

It was an island, a low-lying sliver of sand perhaps fifty acres in extent, with a definite channel on either side through which flowed the leisurely waters.

"This," said Jarbone, making a rapid decision, "is it."

"Is what?"

"The spot where we settle down. The map says the United States goes south to the river, so it isn't in the States, and the map also says that Mexico comes north only as far as the river. So it is not in Mexico."

Rodriguez looked doubtful. "Soldiers and law officers are not much concerned with maps in this wild place. They shoot first and decide the question of jurisdiction later. Me, I have no burning desire to get shot."

Jarbone nodded. "If the island were uninhabited you might be right. But remember, your country and mine are at peace. We will build a small fort upon the island. Say that Mexican soldiers approach the far shore. I have no quarrel with Mexicans; I show myself. I run up the American flag. They are content, and ride away."

"I am listening." Juan's eyes were beginning to gleam.

"Suppose Americans appear on this bank. I do not show myself, but you have no enemies north of the border. You run up the Mexican flag. The Americans assume that the island is a part of Mexico, and they leave you in peace."

JUAN began to laugh. "What are we waiting for?"

They plunged their horses into the stream and took posession of their new domain.

"One thing," said Jarbone, when they had built their fort and their cabin. "No women. No women on this island."

Juan agreed. Juan was an easy-going man who liked nothing better than to sit in the sun and watch his friend wrestle the heavy logs into the fort's stockade.

They had been there three months, and had had no trouble. Once a detachment of cavalry from Fort Davis had ridden by, saluting Juan's Mexican flag, and twice Mexicans had appeared and parleyed with Jarbone, standing under the protection of the American colors.

"We need supplies," said Jarbone that morning, "and since it is unwise for me to ride into El Paso, the job is yours."

He watched Juan splash through the channel to the American side and then went happily back to his work, unaware that danger threatened his sanctuary.

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He had no warning until late the following afternoon, when the protesting squeal of hubs on dry axles shivered the quiet air. Prudently he started for the fort, but looked back in time to see the sorriest outfit in his experience lurch over the lip of the rise to the north and flounder down toward the water's edge.

It was a wagon, or what was left of a wagon, drawn by a starved mule and a miserable horse. The canvas was torn and the bows were bent. Behind it rode Juan, something hangdog in his bearing, and on the wagon seat a yellow-haired girl handled the team.

A great rage filled Jarbone as the horse and mule struggled into the stream, straining as they pulled the teetering wagon across and up onto the island's sand, and paused, heaving and blowing as if each breath would be their last.

This was an invasion, or treason, and Jarbone burned with a dull, cold anger as he stalked forward, noting that his partner was careful not to look at him. The girl sat holding the lines as if she were afraid that once she released them the staggering team would drop dead.

Beside her was a little old man with a nut-brown face and a broken hat, through whose holes long strands of gray hair escaped.

"Howdy." The old man hopped down as Jarbone came up. "You should fix that ford. It's not safe for man nor beast."

Jarbone's accusing eyes stayed on Juan, and the Mexican stirred uneasily in the saddle. "I found them on the road," he said in defense. "They were about exhausted. They need a day or so to rest.

"We're going to California," the old man volunteered. "If you'll just unhook Dolly and Jefferson Davis, they'll lie down for a spell. I can't do much work myself; I got a misery in my back."

Jarbone knew the girl was watching him. Her blue eyes reminded him of cornflowers, and her hair had a touch of the sun in it. He loosened the patched traces. The harness was tied together with rawhide thongs and almost came apart in his fingers.

Behind him Juan said, "This is Jarbone Drake, my partner, Miss Milly. Jarbone, meet Milly Graves and Grandpaw Eaton."

"It's a pleasure, sir," the old man said, extending a hand.

Jarbone ignored the hand. He watched the girl swing lightly down over the wagon wheel, and thought he read hostility in her eyes. Or maybe it was fear. She reached up and pulled a rifle from the seat. Glancing at it, Jarbone recognized it as the kind the Confederate troops had carried.

"You aren't happy to have us here?" Her voice was warm, deep throated, a little husky.

He flushed. He was embarrassed, and this increased his anger.

"We won't impose on you long," she said, and turned away to speak to Juan, dismissing Jarbone as of no consequence.

He frowned after her, and then pulled the harness from the horse with a vicious jerk. A reedy voice above him said, "You'll hurt Dolly, that you will," and he looked up into a small triangular face with the biggest black eyes he had ever seen.

"Where'd you come from?"

The child, he judged, was seven or eight. She looked wan and underfed, and she wore a dress that had been washed so often it had lost nearly all color. It came only to her knobby bare knees.

She tipped her small head toward the interior of the wagon. "I was asleep. Where are we?"

"Jarbone Island."

"That's a funny name. What's it named after?"

"Me."

He said it shortly as he yanked the harness off the mule and slapped both animals with his hat, since they seemed too tired even to move toward the grass which grew lush at the upper end of the island. Then he lifted the child down, noting how thin she was.

"You must be real important," she said, "to have a whole island."

HE DIDN'T answer, but turned to look after the girl and the old man following Juan to the cabin. He had a premontion that he was about to be evicted. The premonition became a reality as Juan appeared, carrying their clothes and blankets.

Jarbone left the child and walked to face his partner. "Have you gone loco?"

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The Mexican was unhappy. "Jarbone, I have been hungry myself."

Jarbone said, "I don't suppose the fact that she has a pretty face has anything to do with your concern?"

The Mexican reddened slightly. "They are hungry. I have looked in the wagon. There is a little flour, a little cornmeal, a few dried peas. Is that what you need to go to California?"

"Have you forgotten the trouble the last woman got you into? If it hadn't been for me you'd be lying three feet underground."

"It is not necessary that you remind me. But what could I do? They were on the road, with a twisted axle. The old man isn't much good."

"From the looks of him, he never was anything but a no-good rawhider. Who's the girl, his daughter?"

"Her sister married his son. The little one is their child. Miss Milly and the old man have no relationship."

"You found out plenty about them."

"The little one told me. I let her ride before me on my horse until she tired. Her father was killed in your war. Her mother died last year. Her aunt is raising her, but in Tennessee everything is bad, so they go to California to find an uncle."

"In that wagon, alone? Don't they know there are Indians, that there are the deserts to cross?"

Juan spread his hands. "Try to tell them. The old man waves his rifle and tells how he used to shoot squirrels from trees."

Jarbone groaned.

An hour later the girl called them to supper. Jarbone did not want to go, but he did not know how to refuse. Besides, he was hungry.

He came into the cabin to find that she had spread flour sacks over their rude table, and set five places. He watched her as she served the beans and cut slices of beef from the haunch he had pickled.

The sourdough biscuits were good, better than his own, and even the beans had taken on a different flavor. He had to admit that he must have been a little tired of his own cooking. But he did not like the air of permanence with which she seemed to have taken over. He escaped into the outer darkness as soon as possible, pretending to be asleep when Juan came to the fort and unrolled his blankets.

The first thing Jarbone saw when he stepped out the next morning was the horse. She lay on her side, her belly extended hugely, and he knew before he reached the animal that it had killed itself by overeating.

He glared at it furiously, nothing that it had worked into a sack of corn which Juan had carelessly laid aside. He suspected that the Mexican had been careless on purpose to delay the travelers.

A shadow made him turn, and he found the girl silent at his side. There were tears in her blue eyes. She went down on her knees beside the dead animal, cradling its head in her arms. "Dolly."

Jarbone lifted her, saying without expression, "Come away."

He led her back to the fort, seeing her shoulders shake under the faded cotton dress, and hardening his heart against the feeling of responsibility that was growing within him.

"Don't take on, ma'am. There are other horses."

She looked up at him then. "We have no money."

Jarbone was shocked. The idea that anyone could be so silly as to buy a horse, when there were any number of them running around the range loose, had never entered his head.

"I'll get you one," he said, and walked away.

He was fixing the door to the fort stockade when he heard a noise behind him. From long habit he spun, dropping his hand to his gun. Then he grinned a little sheepishly, for it was the child.

"Hi there, Sis." His voice was friendly, because of his embarrassment.

She came over to him. "What are you doing?"

"Fixing the door."

"To keep the rangers out?"

He was startled. "Rangers? Where did you get that idea?"

"Grandpaw says you are outlaws," she said. "Are you outlaws?"

"Well, not exactly."

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"Then why do you fly the Mexican flag when the bluecoats come and the American flag when the Mexicans come?"

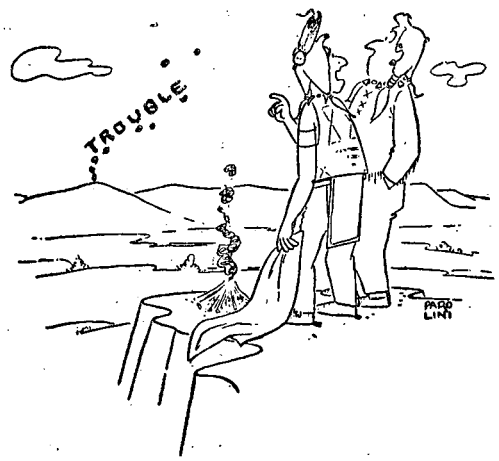
"Who told you about that?"

"Juan. He told me lots of things. I like him, and so does Aunt Milly. She says he's got a nice smile. And even Grandpaw does, only he doesn't hold much with foreigners."

"I see."

"I've still got our flag. It was my Pa's, only he got killed. Why weren't you in the war?"

"I was. We got whipped."



"That spells trouble"

"Grandpaw says no one is ever whipped unless they quit."

JARBONE bent down beside the small figure. "Look, honey. You're remembering something which won't do you any good. You'd better forget it. That flag doesn't mean anything any more. It's just something to feel sad about."

"Is that why your face looks sad? Aunt Milly says that's why."

"Maybe."

He was interrupted by the girl calling them to breakfast. The meal was silent, no one venturing to speak except the old man, who complained because they had beans again.

Jarbone would have liked to remind the old codger that they were lucky to have even beans, but he didn't, for as he looked up he found Milly's gaze upon him. Hastily he finished his coffee and left the room. He got a shovel and dug a hole in the sand. Then he put a rope on the head horse and snaked the carcass into the hole, filling it and patting the sand into place. Before he was finished Milly was beside him, watching.

He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, hoping that she would go away. Something about her presence disturbed him. But, instead of leaving, she spoke in an even tone.

"You've been avoiding me."

He colored, but could think of nothing to say.

"Why?"

He stammered a little. "Well, I guess I just don't hold much with women."

She got a pink spot in each cheek, but she kept on. "What have you got against women? Did one of us do something to you?"

Jarbone was almost inarticulate with confusion. It was something he had never mentioned to anyone, but this girl had a way of worming things out of a man.

"I had a girl once," he said, "down in Austin. I was just a kid. Then I went away to war, and when I came back she'd up and married someone else."

"Oh. That explains it."

Suddenly he was angry with her. He did not know exactly why. "That doesn't explain it," he said. "Women, I mean. They'll all cause trouble one way or another. And when they've got trouble they'll holler and yell and do no thinking. A man can think his way out of a jam."

"Like keeping two flags on this island?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"It's not exactly honest to pretend to be something you aren't."

Jarbone said, "Honest or not, there're times when it pays to pretend to be things you don't like. I got shot, way up North in Pennsylvania, and I might have rotted in prison only I found a blue uniform on a dead man. I put it on and got back South. I guess maybe that's not honest, but it was real healthful. That's what I mean by saying a man can think himself out of a tight spot.

He was talking more than he ever had in his life, but somehow he couldn't seem to stop.

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"Now, you take this island. When I got back to Texas, things were bad. My old man was dead and the ranch was gone, and the country was divided, half the people crying because we had lost the war and the other half carpetbaggers come in to steal what little we had left. So I found this island, and it's mine, and I mean to keep it that way."

"Which means you do not want us here?"

He didn't want them there, even if she was the best cook he could recall. But he thought of the broken wagon and the single mule, and the Comanches and the Apaches, and he said weakly, "Were you planning to stay?"

She said, "Juan asked me to marry him."

"Marry Juan?" Jarbone's chin dropped. He hadn't been as amazed since the Federals held at Cemetery Ridge.

"What's so strange about that?" Her tone had grown a little testy. "People do get married, you know."

"But shucks, you can't be in love. Why, you just met him yesterday."

"I'm not in love." She looked directly at him, and her cornflower-blue eyes were deep and remote and unreadable. "I told him that, but he doesn't care. He says he understands, and that a man should not need to cook for himself. He is kind—you can tell it from his smile. And there are my niece and the grandfather, and—" her lip trembled a little—"and the horse is dead. We cannot go on."

She turned away then, and Jarbone realized that she was crying as she ran back to the cabin. He spat disgustedly into the sand. It just bore out what he had been saying—a woman didn't have it in her to rise to an emergency.

His eyes followed her, and then he saw Juan over beside the fort, and walked toward him. The Mexican refused to meet his gaze; he pretended to be interested in something far downriver.

Jarbone said sharply, "So you finally let a woman come between us."

Rodriguez scratched the tip of his ear. "Jarbone, she is a fine girl, and needs some help. And she is a good cook."

Jarbone grunted. "You never complained about my cooking."

Rodrigues said practically, "But I can't marry you, Jarbone."

"They're not going to stay on my island. That's final."

"I have thought of that," said Rodriguez. "The island, you should admit, is partly mine. We will draw a line across its middle. You can take your choice, the upper end or the lower end."

He waited for Jarbone's answer, still facing downstream. When the silence had grown long he turned to see why his friend had not spoken. Jarbone was not watching him. He was staring toward the American shore, where in the distance a dust cloud was building up into a small fog.

"Juan, here comes trouble. Get your flag and get up to the fort."

RODRIGUEZ looked. Then he turned to run toward the cabin where the flags were kept. But he had taken only a single step when he stopped.

"Jarbone, my friend, have a look at Mexico."

Below them, coming up the river on the Mexican side, was a second dust cloud.

"I think," said Juan Rodriguez, "we will soon have no island to divide."

Jarbone said harshly, "Hurry. Bring both flags and come to the fort."

He stepped hastily inside and mounted the shelf which he had built around the interior of the stockade. Here he grimly checked both rifles, making sure of their loads, meanwhile keeping an eye on the approaching dust clouds.

Juan arrived at a run, carrying both flags and was followed a minute later by the old man, the child, and Milly. She looked up at Jarbone, standing with a rifle in his hands.

"What are you going to do?"

He said tensely, "We'll hope that one bunch gets here before the other. If the Americans come first, maybe Juan can get them to ride off before the Mexicans arrive.

She peered at the dust clouds. "You haven't a chance."

"Then we'll fight."

"And get us all killed."

"You can take the old man and Sis across the river. They won't bother you."

She grabbed the child's hand and ran from

[*Turn to page 52*]

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the fort, and he thought bitterly, how like a woman. She had agreed to marry Juan, but at the first sign of difficulty she was getting out.

He saw her duck into the cabin, but she reappeared without the child, and carrying something in her arms. She sprinted through the entrance of the fort, pausing at the base of the flagpole to fasten the cloth she carried to the halyard. Then, straining on the rope, she pulled it to the very top of the high standard.

Jarbone gaped in utter disbelief as the stars and bars floated out proudly in the desert breeze. Then, as if prompted by some forgotten habit, he saluted the flag.

He was standing thus when she climbed to his side, and his voice was not quite steady as he turned to her. "It's a nice try," he said, and there was the suggestion of moisture in his eyes. "But it won't help us. We can't depend on the flag of a lost cause."

She said waspishly, "You and Juan keep out of sight and let me handle this." She reached out and took the rifle from his hands. "Keep out of sight," she said again, and turned away, holding the rifle as if she understood its use.

The Mexicans arrived first, hauling up on their side of the river, fifteen dusty men, gazing in amazement at the woman standing boldly beneath the unfamiliar banner.

The officer rode forward until his horse's hoofs were in the water. His English, although stilted, was good. "Senora, we would like to cross and search for stolen horses."

She took her time to answer, and when she did her voice was calm and unhurried and confident. "I'm sorry, Colonel, but this island belongs to the Confederate States of America. It is the only part of my country which has not surrendered. I am in command, and I can let no one on the island."

There was a conference among the other Mexicans. It was obvious that they were undecided. Then the officer rode back to the river's brink, saying with a quick smile and a sweep of his hat, "Senora, we do not disturb you, since we see that you have other visitors."

He gestured toward the north, where a detachment of cavalry was now so close that their blue uniforms were plainly visible. Then he led his men briskly away, as if unwilling to witness a battle he knew was coming. Jarbone had been squinting between the logs, and he cursed as he counted ten men and an officer in the approaching group.

"Pull down that flag, quick."

The girl threw him a glance of contempt and walked around the barricade to face the invaders from the North. They too halted at the shore of the stream, and with incredulous eyes regarded the billowing emblem.

An officer with the insignia of a second lieutenant started across. Calmly Milly raised her rifle and put a bullet into the water ahead of him.

He stopped, thunderstruck, and she called to him in a clear voice, "I'm Milly Graves from Tennessee. This is my island. It's not a part of the United States, and I'll fly any flag I please."

Jarbone expected her to be answered by bullets. Instead, a ragged cheer rose from the dusty troopers, gained volume until it seemed to roar across the water. Even the girl was bewildered. She stared at the cavalry men without understanding. She could not know that half the troop were Southerners who had accepted service on the frontier rather than stay in a Federal prison, that the second half were Irish who did not quite comprehend, but were always ready to cheer anything, especially a pretty woman.

THE young officer sat for a moment uncertain. Then a grin broke out across his sun-blackened face. He drew his saber and gravely saluted. No one could be sure whether the salute was for the flag or for the girl standing beneath it, or for both. Then he turned his horse, trotted back to his men, and gave the signal. They pulled away, and as they wheeled in their careful column of twos the chorus of "Dixie" wafted back to the watchers on the little island.

Jarbone was without words. Milly faced him, smiling a little, but her voice was tense. "A woman is worthless in an emergency?"

He did not answer. He just stood there, and suddenly she whirled and hurried to the cabin. After a while she came out with the child, carrying their thin blankets. She paused,

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examined the wagon, then put the blankets into it and headed for the fort, walking steadily.

"May I borrow an ax?"

Jarbone said slowly, "What do you want an ax for?"

She said, "I've got to take out the tongue and try to fashion some shafts so the mule can pull the wagon."

He stared at her stupidly. "Where are you going?"

"To California."

"But I thought you were marrying Juan?"

She turned to look at Juan, standing to Jarbone's right, and smiled. "Juan doesn't love me," she said. "He was marrying me to take care of me, and I was willing to hide. I was licked, defeated, or I thought I was. And then, standing under the flag, I found new strength to go on."

Jarbone said, "You're crazy. You can't go on alone. That mule can't pull the wagon. There are Indians, there are the deserts."

"I'll make it," she said looking squarely at him with those blue eyes.

Suddenly Jarbone knew she would, that she was a person who would never accept defeat. He also knew he didn't want to lose her.

"I'm coming with you," he said.

She did not seem surprised. Very matter-of-factly, she nodded. "If you want to."

He turned to Juan, who was smiling his sad smile. "It's all right, amigo," the Mexican said. "I understand. I have watched it grow. You warned me too often about women. Come, we will catch the horses. I will help you harness."

"You're coming with us?"

"Only a short way. There is not room for two men in one woman's life. I will ride as far as El Paso, in case of trouble. And then, *vaya con Dios.*"

They hitched their two strongest horses to the wagon, loaded what food there was, and they started out, with Jarbone driving, the girl on the seat at his side, the child and the old man in back and Juan following.

When they had forded the stream Jarbone looked back, and saw suddenly that they had forgotten the flag. He stopped and would have gotten down, but Milly shook her head.

"Leave it there."

He hesitated, then spoke to the horses and drove slowly on. He too had been defeated. He too had been trying to run away and hide, but he sensed that as long as the flag flew free he would never be conscious of defeat again. He turned westward, toward a new life. And as far as Jarbone Drake knew, the flag still flew over his island for as long as he lived.

RANCH
FLICKER
TALK

Movie News Roundup by BOB CUMMINGS—Next Issue

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Featuring a Review of Republic's

COME NEXT SPRING

starring

STEVE COCHRAN and ANN SHERIDAN

PLUS

A WORD-AND-PICTURE PERSONALITY SKETCH OF

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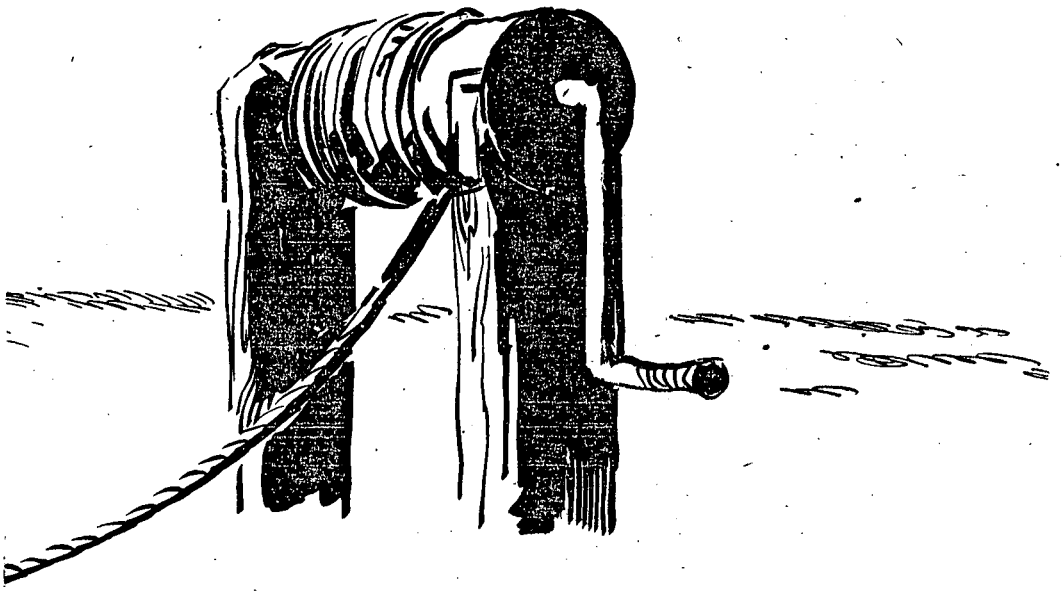
Wears a Stetson

by RAY GAULDEN

THIS WAS KATHY'S fight, and Clee Desmond wanted no part of it . . .

but there are times when a man can't make himself run from trouble



WHEN Clee Desmond rode up and stopped in the yard, a girl appeared in the doorway of the log house.

"Howdy ma'am," Desmond said, touching the brim of his flat-crowned Stetson. "Could I trouble you for a drink of water?"

"The well's around back," the girl said, eyeing him with faint distrust.

Desmond nodded and rode around the house. In the back yard he dismounted, a lean, flat-muscled man with dust on his shoulders, and walked to the well. There was a dipper hanging on a nail, and he was reaching for it when he saw that the girl had come to the back porch and was watching him.

Desmond studied her while he drank. She was eighteen or nineteen, he decided, and not bad looking, even if she was wearing men's clothes. She had reddish-brown hair, gray eyes, and a slender body that was filled out in the right places.

"Good water," Desmond said, smiling at her. Nice and cold."

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She didn't return the smile. "You're a stranger in these parts?"

He nodded. "My name's Clee Desmond. I'm just passing through. This is the first drink I've had since breakfast."

She came toward him, the suspicion gone from her eyes now. "I'm Kathy Everts," she said. "My brother and I own this place."

Desmond took another drink, finding it hard not to stare. Her face was smooth and brown and pretty. Then he caught himself and thought, you haven't time to be getting ideas about some lonesome little ranch girl.

"How far is it to the nearest town?" he asked, still holding the dipper.

"Tremont is ten miles." She looked at him with growing interest. "Do you intend to stop there?"

"Just overnight. I'm heading for Hays City."

Her eyes dropped to his gun. "If you're looking for work, you can find it right here."

"I already have a job lined up with the railroad when I get to Hays City."

Desmond hung the dipper back on the nail, his straying glance passing over the corral and the barn. When he looked back at Kathy Evarts she was smiling at him, a smile too warm and inviting, Desmond thought, for a girl to be giving a stranger.

"It's nice country here," she said. "A lot better than you'll find around Hays City."

His name didn't mean anything to her, he thought. She didn't know him from Adam. She'd no more than set eyes on him and here she was offering him a job, and from the look in her eyes that wasn't all she was offering. Was help that hard to find around here, he wondered?

"It's not the country I'm interested in," he said. "The railroad's paying good money."

She looked disappointed.

"Thanks for the drink," Desmond said, and walked to his horse.

Kathy Everts leaned against the well casing, her shoulders back so that he was made aware of the well-filled front of her shirt. Their eyes met and held for a moment, and Desmond felt his pulse quicken. Then he got hold of himself and rode out of the yard with a nod. When he had gone a short distance he glanced back, and she was still there by the well looking after him. She was a pretty sight, with the sun on her hair that way.

He was tempted to go back and find out more about the job she had offered. It might be fun working for a gal that knew how to use her eyes like that one did. But it would be another riding job, punching cows for thirty or forty a month, and he'd had too many of them in the past.

A trouble-shooter for the railroad made good money, and this time Clee swore he wasn't going to throw it away like he usually did. He'd save a little every month, and it wouldn't be long till he could buy an outfit of his own. But right now I'm just a gun-handy drifter, he thought sourly, with ten dollars in my pocket.

TREMONT was little more than a wide place in the road. The buildings were frame, most of them without paint, and looked drab in the harsh glare of the sun. But there was a livery stable, a cafe, a hotel, and a saloon—the four places Desmond was interested in.

He stabled his horse, rented a room, and after a good meal had only seven of the ten dollars left. But he wasn't worried. Tomorrow he'd make it to Hays City and land a job with the railroad.

With nothing else to do, he drifted over to the saloon. There were a dozen men in the place, most of them at the bar, the rest sitting at a card table.

The bartender, a middle-aged man with a long face, poured Desmond a drink and said, "You can't get better whisky than this."

"It all tastes like hell to me," Desmond said with a grin.

Down the bar, a big rough-featured man started pounding his fist on the mahogany. "A little service here, horseface."

The bartender, picking up Desmond's money, swore softly. "That's Mitch Corey, foreman of the Coffin outfit."

From the bartender's tone, this Mitch Corey sounded as if he were somebody important. But the name and the outfit meant nothing to Desmond. He gave the man a glance, and that was all.

For some reason, Desmond couldn't get Kathy Everts out of his mind. He kept re-

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membering the way she had smiled, the sound of her voice, and the shape of her mouth. Never staying long in one place, the women he had met were drifters like himself. But this Everts girl was different. She wasn't hard and cheap, but she wasn't too innocent either.

Mitch Corey was making loud talk, bragging and getting meaner by the minute. The bartender looked worried, and the men at the card table were casting uneasy glances at the Coffin foreman.

"Horseface," Corey said, speaking to the bartender. "Why don't you try smiling once in a while?"

The bartender scowled. "You know I don't like that name."

Corey grinned. "Maybe you'd rather I called you Mr. Hastings?"

Still scowling, the bartender started to move away.

"You stay right here," Corey told him, "and keep my glass filled."

Hastings hesitated. "Damn it, Mitch, you're not the only customer."

"To hell with the rest of these yahoos," Corey said, raking the room with a contemptuous glance. "You ought to know by now that when Coffin comes to town you're supposed to treat 'em like they're somebody."

Hasting was beginning to sweat.

While the Coffin crew looked on in amusement, Corey hitched up his trousers and said, "Maybe you'd better just close the bar to everybody except Coffin."

"Aw, hell, Mitch, you're carrying it too far."

Corey reached across the bar and got a handful of Hastings's shirt. Jerking him forward, the Coffin foreman shoved his face close to the bartender's and snarled, "Didn't you hear what I told you?"

Desmond sipped his drink, thinking that if he were Hastings he'd grab a bung-starter and hit that big cuss right between the eyes. But Hastings was so scared he was shaking.

He called out, "Bar's closed."

Several townsmen lost no time in moving away. Watching them, Mitch Corey laughed, and then his hard eyes settled on Desmond, who was pouring another drink and taking his time with it.

"You, down there on the end," Corey said. "Maybe you didn't hear Horseface?"

"I came in here to drink," Desmond answered, "and I'm not through yet."

Corey blinked in surprise. Then he stepped away from the bar and, with narrowed eyes pinned on Desmond, said, "Maybe you don't know who I am?"

"And I don't give a damn."

Corey stiffened. Then he straightened his shoulders and started down the bar. He said, "We know how to handle tough strangers around here."

The foreman had enough whiskey in him to make him mean, but he wasn't drunk. Desmond could tell, from his slow, steady tread. As though there were nothing to worry about, Desmond drained his glass and placed it carefully on the bar. He appeared relaxed, but his nerves were humming.

He could have avoided this trouble by taking his bottle and going to one of the tables, but he wasn't in the habit of walking away from men like Mitch Corey.

He waited until the Coffin foreman was close. Then, giving the man no time to get set, Desmond moved fast. He stepped in and smashed Corey on the nose, and again in the mouth.

Chairs banged and scraped the floor as men at near-by tables moved to get out of the way. The Coffin riders backed to the end of the bar and stood there in a tight little group, calling encouragement to Mitch Corey.

"Take him apart, Mitch. Stomp his guts out."

Desmond's swift attack had forced Corey to back up, but he was still on his feet and now he began dealing out punishment of his own.

Desmond took a vicious blow to the stomach, but kept moving in. There was a small, reckless smile on his lips that Corey's fists couldn't remove.

They fought along the bar, hammering each other without let-up. Desmond took a glancing blow on the side of the head and came back with a solid right hand blow that cracked against Corey's jaw. The Coffin hand was driven back against one of the card tables, causing it to skid through the sawdust to the wall.

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PULLING himself up, Corey grabbed a chair and rushed toward Desmond, who moved back until he was against the bar. When Corey brought the chair down, Desmond ducked and the chair splintered on the bar top. While Corey was off balance, Desmond stepped in and nailed him with a right and a left.

The Coffin foreman, dropping the back of the chair, staggered along the bar. His desperate glance settled on a quart bottle, and he grinned coldly as Desmond drew up. Moving away from the bar with the bottle in his hand, Corey waited a moment, then threw it at Desmond's head. Desmond ducked and the bottle, whizzing past his head, hit the back bar-mirror. Glass shattered, followed by Hasting's pleading voice.

"You're going to wreck the place."

The tiny smile was still on Desmond's lips. He moved forward, using both fists and putting his weight behind the blows. Corey grunted as they landed, and he began to retreat. A table went over as they crashed into it and still they fought, all the way across the room. Seeing a window behind Corey, Desmond measured his man and let go with a long, looping right. The blow slammed Corey back against the window and he went through it with a crashing sound.

A glance through the opening showed Desmond that the fight was over. Corey lay at the edge of the porch, sprawled on his back, unconscious. While the Coffin crew was still staring in disbelief, Desmond turned to face them.

"Any of you boys want to take up where he left off?"

They traded looks, and one of them shook his head.

From the window behind Desmond a rough voice asked, "What's going on in there?"

Hastings, looking as if he were ready to cry, said, "They did a good job of wrecking the place, Sam. They busted my mirror and half the furniture."

The man called Sam was small and wiry, and wore a badge pinned to his black vest. The gun strapped to his thigh looked almost too big for him to be carrying, but he drew it.

Scowling at Desmond, he said, "You come out here where I can get a look at you."

Keeping an eye on the Coffin crew, Desmond stepped through the window and onto the porch. Before he had a chance to talk to the marshal, boots pounded along the plank walk, and a moment later a man came onto the porch. He was over six feet tall, wearing expensive boots and a black suit.

"What's this, Myerson?" he demanded. "What happened to my foreman?"

"Looks like he tangled with the wrong man, Mr. Rawden," the marshal said, glancing down at the still unconscious Mitch Corey.

Rawden gave the lawman a sharp glance, before his eyes settled on Clee Desmond. "What'd you hit him with?"

"My fists," Desmond answered easily.

Rawden's eyes narrowed. "We don't like strangers coming along and beating up the citizens."

"What's your name, mister?" Myerson asked.

"Clee Desmond," he said, answering the marshal first. "And if that loud-mouthed thing lying there is the kind of citizens you've got in this town, I'm glad I'm just passing through."

The Coffin crew drifted onto the porch, followed by Hastings, who remained at a distance, nervous and uneasy. He said in a whining voice, "Somebody's got to pay for the damages."

"Don't look at me," Desmond said.

Ignoring the bartender, Rawden spoke to the Coffin riders. "One of you boys get some water and bring Mitch around."

Hastings, shuffling his feet, said, "It'll cost a hundred dollars or more to get another mirror."

"Do you intend to pay the man?" Rawden asked.

Desmond shook his head.

"Guess you'll have to lock him up, Sam," the rancher said, giving Desmond a thin smile.

Sam Myerson looked uncomfortable. "Now hold on a minute, Mr. Rawden. If it were Mitch that started the trouble, then—"

"My foreman didn't start it," Rawden cut in as he turned to face the bartender. "Did he?"

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Hastings wet his lips and, avoiding Desmond's eyes, said, "I'm not sure who broke the mirror. They were fighting and one of them threw something."

"Why, damn you," Desmond said, staring toward the bartender.

Sam Myerson stepped in between them. The marshal was still holding his gun. Desmond stopped, anger a tight coil in him.

"Well, don't stand there like a damned fool, Marshal," Rawden said. "Lock him up."

"I'll handle this," Myerson said, but from the tone of his voice Desmond knew the marshal would do as he was told.

"Have you got a hundred dollars to pay the damages?" Myerson asked.

"No, but I wouldn't pay it if I did."

"Then I reckon I'll have to take you to jail."

THE smug expression on Rawden's face irritated Desmond. He hald half a mind to wipe it off with his fists, but he fought down the urge and left the porch with the marshal.

Turning up the street, they passed the buggy Rawden had gotten out of. It was a shiny, yellow-wheeled rig and there was a woman sitting on the seat, waiting, evidently, for the rancher's return. She was tall and full-breated, with a sultry beauty that held Desmond's attention for a moment.

When they were past, Myerson said, "That's Rawden's wife, Della."

"Some looker."

"Yeah, most men seem to think so."

They walked on. When they passed the general store, Desmond saw Kathy Everts standing on the porch watching them. Desmond, in a sour mood, gave her only a glance.

When they reached the jail, Myerson nodded toward one of the two cells at the rear of the office. Desmond hesitated.

Glancing at the marshal's gun, he said, "How long do you figure on keeping me here?"

"Well, I don't know. I'll have Hastings, the saloonman, make out a complaint, but we won't be able to have a trial till the circuit judge comes through here next week."

"Next week? You mean you're keeping me locked up till then?"

"I'm sorry, Mister. That's all I can do."

Desmond's stare was hot and accusing. "So you and everybody else around here jumps when Rawden cracks the whip?"

Myerson sighed heavily. "That's about the size of it."

"Is Coffin the only oufit in these parts?"

"There're four others, but they don't amount to much."

"You must be pretty proud of yourself," Desmond said.

The marshal didn't answer. He motioned for Desmond to enter the cell. When the door was locked behind him, Myerson laid the key ring on a battered desk against the wall. He stood with his back to the cell, quiet for a long time.

Then, still without looking at Desmond, he said, "When I was young like you I had a lot of big ideas."

Desmond walked to the back of the cell. There was a small window there, and he stood looking out at a weed-choked vacant lot. He wished he hadn't stopped in Tremont, wished he had stayed out of that saloon. The marshal was still talking, but Desmond paid little attention to what he was saying.

"I was sheriff for a while, and I made men like Lafe Rawden toe the line. I had a lot of friends in those days, but there were too many bad ones to handle. As soon as you got rid of one, another came along to take his place—tough kids with the fuzz still on their faces, but fast with a gun. And all the time I was getting older, slowing down, till finally one day I couldn't get my gun out fast enough and I got a bullet in the arm."

Desmond came back to the front of the cell and leaned against the bars, watching Sam Myerson. The marshal still stood beside his desk, a sag to his shoulders and his face turned toward the street.

"I wasn't much good after that," Myerson continued as if he were talking to himself. "So I took the marshal job, and I've been here for a long time. No, I'm not proud of myself, but it doesn't bother me now that I know what I'm up against. And letting a someone like Rawden tell you what to do

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is better than swamping out some saloon."

"A man still has to live with himself."

"Yeah, but it's not so hard to do when you know you've done the best you could, and when it finally hits you that the folks you're trying to help don't seem to care."

Locked up for something he hadn't done, it was hard for Desmond to sympathize with the marshal. He didn't like the idea of stay-up cooped up here, waiting for a trial and knowing that, when it was over, he might have more time to serve.

"Listen," Desmond said in a low earnest tone. "That saloon man was lying. It was Corey that busted the mirror."

"I figured it was," the marshal said. "But I'll have to take Hastings's word, and he's saying what Rawden wants him to."

DESMOND went over and sat down on the cell cot. He was still sitting there when he heard the tap of bootheels, and Kathy Everts came into the office. Myerson was leaning back in his swivel chair, reading a newspaper.

He put it down and said, "Howdy, Kathy."

"I heard what happened," she said, coming over to the desk. "If Hastings gets a hundred dollars, he'll drop the charge."

Meyerson peered at her curiously. "Do you know this fellow Desmond?"

"He stopped by our place today."

"Long enough to get a drink of water," Desmond said. He looked at the girl, wondering what had brought her here.

"I have a hundred dollars," she said. "I'm willing to spend it to get you released."

Desmond frowned at her. "You don't spend that kind of money to release from jail a man that you saw only once in your life."

"Oh, there're strings on the offer."

Myerson shoved his hat back and scratched his head. "I don't know what this is all about."

"I think I'm beginning to," Desmond said, his eyes still on the girl. "She's looking for a rider, and she's willing to pay the hundred bucks and let me work it out."

Kathy nodded. Your freedom for two months' work, that's what I'm offering."

"Sounds like a fair deal to me," Myerson said. "Fifty dollars a month is good wages."

Desmond shook his head. "I've got a job lined up with the railroad over at Hays City. Two months from now they'll probably have somebody else, and it's too good a job to pass up."

"How much time will he get for breaking the mirror?" Kathy asked.

Myerson shrugged. "Maybe thirty days."

Let me out of here for a little while, Desmond thought, and I'll see that Mitch Corey kicks through with the money. But he knew Myerson wouldn't open the door until the money was paid.

"I'm willing to compromise," Kathy said. "We'll make it a month's work. You can write the railroad and tell them you've been detained."

He supposed he could do that. And working for Kathy Everts would be a lot better than lying in this jail cell for he didn't know how long. Remembering the way she had smiled at him this morning, he decided it could be a pleasant month.

"Is it a deal, mister?" Kathy asked.

Before Desmond could speak, the marshal said, "They tell me that cell cot is pretty hard to sleep on."

Desmond smiled. "Under the circumstances, I don't see how I can turn you down."

"Then it's a deal?"

Desmond nodded.

The girl paid Myerson the hundred dollars to give the saloon man. When the marshal came to open the door, he said, "I hope you aren't sorry, Kathy."

After telling Kathy Everts he would meet her at the livery stable, Desmond got his warbag and checked out of the hotel. On his way to the livery barn he looked at the saloon, wondering if Mitch Corey were still there. The Coffin foreman had broken that mirror, and if he thought he was going to get away with having Desmond pay for it, he was wrong.

Marshal Sam Myerson was leaning against the front of the saloon. When Desmond started to turn in, Myerson said, "I figured you might take a notion to head for here."

"I've got a little business with Corey."

"Why don't you forget it?"

Desmond shook his head. "I couldn't sleep nights if I did."

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"I know how you feel, but I don't want any more trouble today, and I'd hate to see you land back in jail."

Desmond scowled at him. "I don't think much of your town, Marshal."

"The town's all right," Myerson said heavily. "It's the people, myself included, that're wrong."

Desmond walked on. He saw Della Rawden on the porch of the general store, her gaze on a hitch rack across the street. A man was tying his horse to the rail, taking his time while he looked at Della. For a moment they didn't seem aware of anything or anybody. Desmond thought, I wonder if her husband knows about this?

Then Lafe Rawden stepped out of the barbershop a few doors down and turned toward the store. When Della saw him, she sobered quickly and stopped looking at the man across the street.

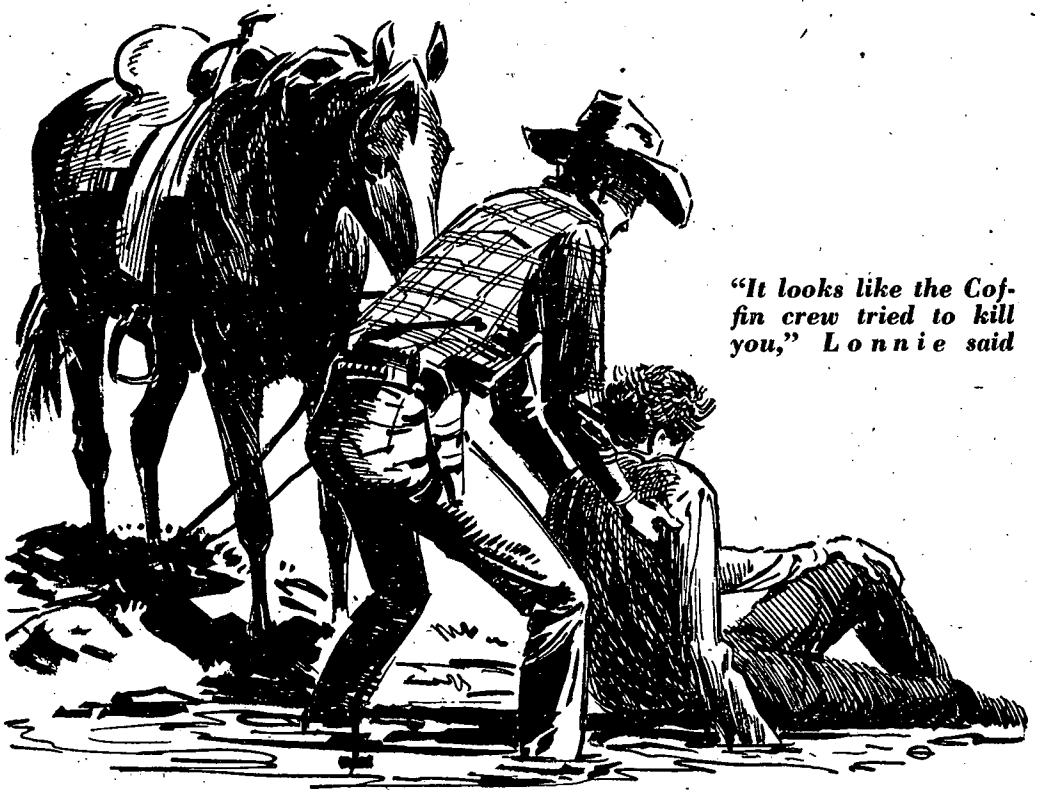
Desmond reached the store at the same time Rawden did. The rancher stopped and, regarding Desmond with faint amusement, said, "You didn't stay in jail long."

Desmond gave him a hard stare. "I figure your foreman owes me a hundred bucks. You can tell him I aim to collect."

Rawden smiled. "A real tough hombre, aren't you?"

"Tough enough so that I don't stand still for having a raw deal pulled on me."

THE marshal was starting toward them, so Desmond walked on. By the time he had saddled his horse, Kathy Everts was waiting for him in front of the barn. With her was the young man Desmond had seen looking at Della Rawden.



"It looks like the Coffin crew tried to kill you," Lonnie said

"My brother, Lonnie," Kathy said, introducing them.

A slender man of twenty-one or twenty-two, Lonnie Everts shook hands, but he was looking at Desmond without interest.

As the three of them were riding out of town, Lafe Rawden was helping his wife into

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the buggy. Starting around the rig, the rancher stopped and stared narrowly at Desmond and the Everts.

When the town was behind them, Desmond studied Kathy Everts, wondering again why she had gone to so much trouble to hire a rider. It seemed as if her brother ought to be able to handle all the work there was around the place.

"Since we're between roundups," Desmond said, "what do you have that needs doing?"

The girl didn't look at him directly. "Lonnie needs help putting up a fence."

Desmond didn't say anything, but he was thinking that she ought to be able to get that kind of help for a lot less than what she was paying him.

When they reached the ranch, Kathy went to the house to start supper, leaving Desmond and Lonnie at the corral. Young Everts, unsaddling, said, "We'll get an early start in the morning."

He hadn't said a dozen words on the way home, and Desmond wondered what was eating on him, why that moodiness was in his eyes.

"Rawden crowding you folks?" Desmond asked.

"No, we haven't had any trouble with him."

"But you're looking for it."

Lonnie pulled his saddle off and turned to face Desmond. "You might as well know. Rawden's bringing a herd up from Texas and when they get here, he's going to need more grass."

Desmond looked toward the house, thinking, so that's why she hired me. The little wench knew she was going to have trouble with Coffin, and when I stopped by here this morning she sized me up as a tough hand.

After supper, Lonnie Everts saddled up and rode out. Desmond, rolling a smoke in front of the house, was watching him, when Kathy came out and stood beside him.

It was dark now, and a yellow moon had climbed into the sky. With his cigarette going, Desmond looked at Kathy Everts. She had changed to a dress. It was plain, and faded from too many washings, but he was aware of the difference it made in her.

Glancing toward the bunkhouse, Desmond said, "I take it that you used to have some riders?"

"Yes, before my father died we had a small crew. But a bad winter almost wiped us out, and we had to let them go."

They were quiet for a time, standing there in the darkness close together, and Desmond was conscious of her nearness. Remembering the way she had smiled at him this morning, he thought, she wants to be kissed, so what are you waiting for?

"I like you in that dress," he said.

"Do you?" she said, without looking at him.

He dropped his cigarette and put a boot on it, mashing it into the ground. Suddenly he reached out and caught her by the arm and pulled her around to face him. Their eyes met and held for a moment before he jerked her up against him. Stirred by the warmth and softness of her body, he kissed her roughly, hungrily.

She didn't respond the way a girl usually did when she wants to be kissed, and when he let her go she brought her hand up quickly and slapped him hard across the face. Then she stepped back and stood there, breathing heavily.

Desmond's face was burning from the blow. He grinned tightly and said, "Why you little—"

"If you think I'm like those honkytonk floozies you're used to being around, you're wrong."

"You were sure acting like one when I stopped by here this morning."

"Just because I smiled at you is no reason for you to think anything like that."

Desmond stared at her, puzzled. "Either you're the dumbest female I ever came across, or you're trying to play both ends against the middle."

"I—don't know what you mean."

"Don't give me that innocent stuff."

She flushed and lowered her eyes.

"Don't you know you can't play up to a man like that, lead him on, and then not expect him to do anything?"

"I was just trying to be nice."

"Sure you were. Putting on a nice little act, hoping you'd get me to fall for it so I'd take the job. And why did you want that?

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Because you're expecting trouble with the Coffin outfit, and you took me for a tough hand that might do you some good."

SHE looked away from him. "I told you we needed help putting up a fence."

"But what you had in mind was getting me to take the job. Then I'd see what you're up against, start feeling sorry for you, and when the trouble with Rawden breaks I'd be on hand to side you."

She looked at him then. "You can't blame a girl for trying."

Desmond regarded her for a moment in silence, wondering if he had looked soft and stupid to her this morning.

"Now that you know how it is," she said, watching him closely, "I suppose you'll be leaving."

Desmond shook his head. "When you got me out of jail it wasn't because you felt sorry for me. We made a deal, and it looks like I'm stuck whether I like it or not."

"It's only for a month, and then you can go on and get your job with the railroad."

"If I'm still alive by then," Desmond said sourly. Leaving her standing there, he crossed the yard and went into the bunkhouse.

The next morning, after breakfast, Desmond and Lonnie Everts started setting fence posts along the creek.

"Do you think that stringing wire will keep Rawden off your grass?" Desmond asked.

Lonnie shook his head. "I figure it's a waste of time, but Sis bought the wire, so I'll put the fence up to keep her happy."

"The ranch doesn't mean much to you, huh?"

"It's just that I know when I'm licked."

"A man is never whipped till he admits it."

Lonnie worked a while in silence. Watching him, Desmond could tell that the youth had something on his mind besides fence building. There was a moodiness in his eyes. He finished tamping dirt around a cedar pole and walked to his horse.

"I've got some business with a neighbor up the creek," he said, not looking directly at Desmond. "I'll be back in a little while."

Desmond nodded, and watched him ride up the stream. When Lonnie was out of sight, Desmond put the post hole digger down and got his own mount. Curious as to where Lonnie was heading, Desmond rode in the same direction. When he had gone a short distance, he pulled away from the creek and rode to higher ground.

After he had traveled a mile or more, he caught sight of Lonnie, who had stopped on the creek bank in a small clearing surrounded by willows. Young Everts had dismounted and was leaning against a cottonwood, looking out across the stream.

He's waiting for someone, Desmond thought, keeping out of sight behind a cedar. After the way Lonnie had looked at Della Rawden in town yesterday, Desmond would have laid odds he had come here to meet the girl. If he wanted to carry on with her, Desmond told himself, it was none of his business and he wasn't going to spy on them.

As he started to turn his horse, he saw the girl ride over a rise and put her mount down the slope toward the creek. She held Desmond's attention for a moment, and he waited until she was out of sight in the willows. Once more he was about to turn back, but now a second rider pulled his gaze. The horsebacker was too far away for him to recognize, but he was coming from the same direction as Della had come.

Without stopping to consider it, Desmond turned his horse toward the rider. He was in the open now, passing within plain view of the two on the creek bank. He put his horse into a lope and gained the next rise as the horsebacker was coming up the slope toward him. It was Lafe Rawden. At sight of Desmond he reined in, smiling.

"I was on my way over to see you, Desmond. You saved me part of the ride."

Evidently he had not been following his wife, Desmond thought. He said, "How'd you know where I'd be?"

"Saw you ride out of town with the Everts yesterday, and the marshal told me you were going to work for them."

"So?"

Rawden leaned forward, both hands on his saddle horn. He said, "I was sore yesterday when you beat up my foreman, but I got over it and realized that I had underestimated you."

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"Why don't you say what's on your mind?"

The rancher's smile slipped a little. "I hate to see a man get suckered into a deal like the Everts girl is pulling on you. I figure if you're going to hang around this part of the country a while, you might as well work for a real outfit. Coffin could pay you two hundred a month."

DESMOND shook his head. "You've got the wrong idea, mister. I'm not a gunman that sells his irons to the highest bidder."

"I'd still like to have you on my side of the fence."

"From the looks of that crew of yours, you don't need me."

"It's just that I want to avoid any unnecessary trouble. The Everts I can handle easily, but if you're still around when my herd gets here, you might decide to keep them from crossing the creek. It's possible that you could kill two or three of my men before they stopped you; and I'd just as soon work it out so that doesn't happen."

"If this is all you came to talk about," Desmond said, "you're wasting your time."

Rawden took his hands off the horn; his face was hard now. "Think it over, Desmond. In case you get tired of that two-bit outfit, come talk to me."

"Don't hold your breath waiting."

Rawden turned his horse and rode back the way he had come. He's a big man who intends to grow bigger, Desmond thought—a man who knows what he wants and doesn't give a damn about anybody else.

When the rancher was out of sight, Desmond reined his horse around and, with only a glance at the creek, returned to the Everts ranch. He had started to work on the fence again when hoofs clattered along the creek. A moment later Lonnie Everts rode up and swung down.

"You followed me," he said, coming toward Desmond.

Desmond stopped digging. "I didn't like working by myself," he said, "so I decided to take a ride."

Young Everts' face was dark with anger. "I saw you talking to Rawden. What did you tell him?"

"Simmer down," Desmond said, frowning at him. "I went over there to head Rawden off, not to tell him about you and his wife."

Lonnie's temper exploded. "Damn you," he cried.

Desmond saw the blow coming. He dropped the post hole digger and tried to duck, but young Everts's fist smashed against his jaw. He staggered back, and Lonnie followed him.

"You crazy damned fool," Desmond said.

He went under a wild right and came up, his own temper breaking loose now. When Lonnie stepped in again, Desmond was waiting. He hit him with a right and a left and Lonnie went down, sprawling in the dirt and weeds.

"You're too hot headed," Desmond said, rubbing his knuckles.

The clatter of hoofs drew his attention, and he saw Kathy Everts riding toward them. The girl's face was troubled as she dismounted quickly and ran to her brother.

"Lonnie, are you all right?"

Young Everts sat up, shaking his head.

Desmond gave him a sober regard. "Sorry I had to do that, but you didn't give me much choice."

Kathy, still on her knees beside her brother, looked up, and there was anger in her eyes. "I must have been crazy thinking I could get any help from you. You're nothing but a troublemaker."

Evidently she hadn't seen enough of the fight to know that her brother had started it, and Desmond was in no mood to try explaining.

He said sourly, "You made the deal, lady, and if you want to back out, it's all right with me."

Lonnie was rubbing his jaw. He said between his teeth, "You get the hell off this ranch."

Desmond looked at Kathy Everts. "Is that the way you want it?"

"Yes, you'd better go."

Desmond walked to his horse and stepped into the saddle. Looking down at the girl, he said, "I'll pay you back the hundred dollars, and then we'll be even."

She didn't answer, and she didn't look at him as he lifted the reins and started his horse down the creek.

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Riding toward town, Desmond's anger cooled, and he couldn't blame Lonnie Everts too much for taking that swing at him. The kid was in love, had brooded so much about Della's marrying Rawden that he had gotten to the point where he had to hit something.

Still, Desmond told himself, he now had an excuse to pull out. If he stayed on the Everts place for a month he might lose his job with the railroad, and a man didn't find something that paid as well as that every day.

But there was the matter of the hundred dollars that he owed Kathy, and he didn't intend to leave without paying her. Mitch Corey had broken that bar mirror, and it was Mitch who was going to kick through with the money.

SWINGING south, Desmond rode in the direction Rawden had come from this morning. Two hours later he reached Coffin's headquarters, and drew up a moment to scan the outfit before riding in. There was a frame house, its new coat of paint gleaming in the afternoon sun. Some of the crew were at the corral but, seeing no sign of Corey, Desmond went on to the house.

He knew the men were watching him as he dismounted at the edge of the yard. When he started up the walk, the movement of curtains drew his attention to an upstairs window. He had a glimpse of Della Rawden's face, before she stepped away and the curtain fell back in place.

In a reckless mood, Desmond crossed the porch and rapped on the door. It opened presently, and Lafe Rawden stood there. At sight of Desmond a thin smile touched the rancher's mouth.

"Come in, Desmond," he said, stepping back. "I didn't expect you quite so soon."

He walked into a long living room with a rock fireplace at one end. It was spacious and well furnished, Desmond saw at a glance. Then his gaze fastened on Mitch Corey, who was leaning against the mantel with a cigarette dangling from one corner of his mouth.

Still looking at the foreman, Desmond spoke to Rawden. "I didn't come to take that job you offered me."

"What's on your mind, then?"

"A hundred dollars—money that went to pay for a bar mirror that your foreman busted."

Corey straightened, and his mouth was sullen.

"Do I get it," Desmond asked, "or do I take it out of your hide?"

Rawden chuckled. "I've got to hand it to you, mister, riding in here this way."

Desmond's eyes remained on Corey. "What about the money?"

The foreman wet his lips. "I haven't got that much."

When Desmond started toward him, Rawden said, "Hold on. I'll pay you the money, and take it out of Mitch's wages." He pulled out a wallet, smiling as he counted the money and handed it to Desmond. "Like I told you this morning," I don't see any sense in having trouble that I can avoid."

"I don't like this," Mitch Corey said, glaring at Desmond.

Desmond pocketed the money and turned to the door without another word. Rawden was watching him in faint amusemnet.

The rancher said, "Stick around, Desmond, and we'll have a drink."

"Thanks," Desmond said, "but I'm in a hurry."

The rancher's amusement was gone. "My cattle will be here tomorrow, so you don't have much time to decide whether you're going to work for me or not."

With his hand on the doorknob, Desmond said, "I don't need much time to make up my mind about that."

"You're sure about it, huh?"

"Damned sure."

"Then you'd better put miles between you and this range."

Desmond grinned tightly. "Is that a warning?"

Rawden shrugged.

Desmond opened the door and stepped onto the porch. There he drew up, instantly alert as he saw that the Coffin crew was gathering around the doorway. There were five of them, and they stood there as though they were killing time. One man was leaning against the front of the house, cleaning his nails with a knife. Without even a glance at

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Desmond, he closed the knife. The sound of the blade clicking was loud in the silence.

Desmond started past them, and one of the men stuck his foot out. Desmond tripped and fell forward, realizing the crew had gotten a sign from either Rawden or Corey. Before he could regain his balance, a boot lifted and drove into his stomach. That bent him over and, while he was fighting the sudden sickness, a fist landed on the back of his neck.

He went to his knees and then lunged up and lashed out with both fists. He had a glimpse of a grinning face, caught the swift change of expression as his fist landed. But it was a losing fight and he knew it. They stayed away from him, first one moving in, then another.

Now Mitch Corey had joined the group. While two of the crew held Desmond up, the foreman went to work with both fists on Desmond's face. How long it lasted, he didn't know. When he came to, they had hoisted him aboard his horse. He swayed in the saddle for a moment, his head hanging down, and he heard their laughter.

Then someone slapped his horse on the rump. When the animal started moving, Desmond had to grab hold of the horn to keep from falling. Weaving and fighting the pain, he rode out of the yard. His senses were reeling, and he rode without direction.

AFTER a time his horse stopped. Desmond didn't know where he was. He felt himself falling, felt his fingers slipping from around the horn. His strength was gone, and he pitched out of the saddle. The shock of cold water in his face revived him a little. He saw that he had fallen into a stream.

It wasn't far to the bank, and the water was shallow enough so that if he sat up his head was out of the water. There was a boulder close by and he leaned against it, water lapping around his waist. Fear touched him when he realized that if he passed out again he would drown. The pain kept hammering at him.

His head was sagging when he caught the murmur of hoofbeats. A little later someone had hold of him and was dragging him out of the water. When they reached the bank, Desmond shook water out of his face and tried to focus his eyes on the man standing over him.

It was Lonnie Everts. He said, "What happened to you?"

Desmond shook his head again, trying to clear it. He muttered, "The Coffin crew wanted to have a little fun."

"Looks like they tried to kill you," Lonnie said. "Let's get up to the house and have Sis tend to you."

"I'll be all right."

Desmond glanced up the bank and saw the fence posts that Lonnie was setting, and knew he had ridden toward the Everts place without realizing it.

"Some of those cuts are pretty deep," Lonnie said. "We'd better let Kathy have a look at you."

Desmond's face was beginning to swell, but he felt better. He reached in his pocket and found that the hundred dollars was still there. At least they had let him get away with that.

"The way you talked the last time I saw you," Desmond said, "it's a wonder you didn't let me drown."

"Aw, hell, Desmond, I'm sorry about that. I ain't been fit to live with for months."

"It's all right," Desmond said. "Forget it."

Lonnie was quiet for a moment. Then he said, without looking at Desmond, "Since you saw me meet Della this morning, I reckon I'd better set you straight."

"It's your business, and none of mine."

"I know, but I don't want anybody getting the wrong idea."

Desmond rolled and lighted a cigarette while Lonnie Everts talked.

"After Della's folks died, the only job she could get was working at the saloon. That's where I met her. We saw each other a lot and I wanted her to quit and marry me, but she kept saying she wasn't good enough for me, that to the good folks of the town she was a bad woman. I told her she was wrong, and we squabbled about it. Then she up and married Rawden. He'd been trying to get to her all along, but she didn't love him and she still doesn't."

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"What's she sticking with him for?"

"She's afraid of him, just like everybody else is."

Desmond took a drag on his smoke. "You keep on seeing her, and one of these days Rawden will catch you two together. Then somebody's going to get killed."

"That's what she told me this morning. She said she had married him and would have to make the best of it, and that we'd better not see each other any more."

"It's tough, Lonnie, but you've got a sister and a ranch to think about."

The kid nodded. "Maybe you knocked some sense into me this morning, because after you left I got to thinking about it. I could see I'd been acting like a damned fool."

Desmond got his horse and they rode toward the house. Kathy came out when they stopped in the yard. She looked at Desmond, quick concern filling her eyes at sight of his battered face.

"What happened?"

"I went over to Coffin to get that hundred dollars I owe you," Desmond said, giving her a vague smile. "All I got was a beating." The money was in his pocket, but she didn't know that and he wasn't going to tell her.

"You'd better tend to him," Lonnie said.

"All I need is some dry clothes," Desmond told them.

Kathy was insistent, so Desmond followed her into the house while Lonnie went to the corral. Desmond sat at the kitchen table while Kathy applied antiseptic to the cuts on his face.

"You shouldn't have gone to Coffin for that money."

"Why?"

"Because I didn't play fair with you in the first place, and it would have served me right if you had ridden on."

He winced from the sting of the antiseptic, and said, "When a person gets desperate enough I reckon it's hard to play fair."

"Don't make excuses for me. What I did was wrong. You were in a spot, and I took advantage of it."

"We made a deal."

"You're offering to go through with it now because you feel sorry for me."

Desmond shook his head. "After what hapened today, I'd stay whether you wanted me to or not."

WORKING on his face, Kathy was close to him. Her nearness disturbed Desmond. He looked at her and found himself wondering how it would be to settle down on a little place like this with a woman like Kathy for a wife. She was the kind who'd work with a man, help him over the rough spots.

There was something in her eyes that drew him in a way that was new and different. Then he caught himself, remembering that he had a good job lined up with the railroad, a chance to work and save his money so that someday he could have a real outfit.

Kathy finished, and put the cork back in the bottle of antiseptic. "It's no use, Desmond," she said heavily. "When you first stopped by here, I took you for a fighting man, and I got my hopes up. I thought, with your help, maybe we could hold out."

"Can we count on your neighbors?"

She shook her head. "That's what I had in mind at first. I thought if they had someone to lead them, they'd be willing to fight Rawden. But they won't."

"How do you know?"

"There's three of them along the creek—Bracket, Holmes, and Lesley. They stopped by here a little while ago on their way to town, and said they had heard that Rawden's cattle would be here tomorrow. They're going to leave in the morning and let him have their grass."

Desmond stood up. "Maybe Lonnie and I could go to town and talk to them, get them to change their minds."

Kathy's eyes brightened for an instant. Then the troubled shadows returned. "It's too much to expect of you. I'm sorry I got you mixed up in this mess."

"I got myself mixed up in it when I tangled with Mitch Corey."

When he started to turn away, she reached out and touched his arm. "At first all I could think of was the ranch and how much it means to me. Now I'm thinking of you. I don't want you hurt, maybe killed."

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It was quiet in the room and they stood looking at each other, neither speaking for a long moment. Then Desmond reached for her and she came into his arms, quickly, and clung to him while he kissed her.

When Desmond went outside, Lonnie was coming up from the corral. "Thought I'd get back to stringing wire," Lonnie said.

"We couldn't get that fence up in time to stop Rawden's cattle," Desmond said. "The herd'll be here tomorrow. Kathy says your neighbors are in town, so I figured we'd ride in and have a powwow with them."

"It's all right with me," Lonnie said, "but I can tell you we'll make the trip for nothing."

By the time the three of them reached Tremont, the sun was gone and shadows were gathering about the buildings. Sam Myerson, standing in the doorway of his office, nodded when they reined in at the edge of the walk.

"Bracket, Holmes, and Lesley are over at the saloon," the marshal said, in answer to Lonnie's question. Then the lawman looked at Desmond. "What happened to your face?"

"It's a long story," Desmond said, glancing toward the saloon. "Come on, Lonnie."

Kathy stayed to talk to the marshal while her brother and Desmond rode on to the saloon. The kid, Desmond could tell, was still thinking of Della Rawden, and he had little interest in anything else.

When they went into the saloon, Hastings was busy pouring drinks for three men at one end of the bar. The saloon man glanced up and, seeing Desmond, his face paled. His hand began to shake so that he spilled some of the whisky.

"I don't want any trouble out of you," he said, even before Desmond reached the bar.

"Take it easy," Desmond said. "You lied like hell, but I'm not holding it against you."

"Most of my business comes from Coffin," Hasting said defensively. "I can't afford to get them down on me."

"Sure," Desmond said. "Forget it."

The three men at the bar nodded to Lonnie, and he introduced them to Desmond. Bracket, Holmes, and Lesley were ten-cow ranchers, Desmond thought, and unless he missed his guess there wasn't one of them that would be worth a damn in a gun fight.

"I hear you boys are figuring on pulling out, before Rawden's herd gets here," Desmond said.

Bracket, a gaunt, middle-aged man, nodded. "We've got families to think about, mister, wives and kids. What chance would we have trying to buck Rawden and his pack of gunslicks?"

"If we all stick together," Desmond said, "we can give them a run for their money."

BRACKET shook his head. "There aren't enough of us. Maybe if we had three or four good men we could put up a fight. But the way it is, we'd just get ourselves killed."

"How about some of the men here in town?" Desmond asked.

Lonnie made a sour face. "I told you we'd be wasting our time coming here. Nobody wants any part of trouble with Coffin."

"You can't blame me for not throwing in with you," Hastings said, shifting uneasily. "I've got a business to think about."

"A man must be pretty hard up to make a buck," Desmond said derisively, "when he'll take what you have to take from Coffin."

Hastings flushed and dropped his eyes. The three ranchers, too, were having trouble meeting Desmond's steady gaze.

"I never saw such a gutless bunch," Desmond said with disgust. "Let's get out of here, Lonnie."

They turned from the bar, their boot heels loud in the silence as they crossed the room and went through the slatted doors. A man was crossing the street, hurrying toward them. He came onto the porch, a small, watery-eyed man, and spoke to Lonnie Everts.

"Got a message for you, Lonnie." He hesitated, glancing at Desmond.

"He's a friend of mine," Lonnie said. "What is it, Bert?"

"Mrs. Rawden's over at the hotel, waiting for the eight o'clock stage. She saw you ride in and asked me to tell you she was leaving."

Lonnie glanced toward the hotel and, following his gaze, Desmond saw Della Rawden's face at one of the windows. The girl looked pale and scared.

"She said you'd understand," Bert said.

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"I understand," Lonnie said, his eyes still on the hotel. "Thanks, Bert."

The man turned and went back the way he had come.

"She's decided to leave him," Lonnie said. "That's what I've been trying to get her to do."

Desmond started rolling a smoke, a sourness working on him. They had come here to try to talk the ranchers into fighting, and now that he knew they couldn't be counted on, he wondered how he and Lonnie and Kathy could stop Rawden.

There wasn't any use kidding himself. He was good with a gun, but not good enough to win a fight against the kind of odds he was facing. He tried to tell himself the thing to do was get the hell out while he was still all in one piece, but he knew he wouldn't.

Kathy Everts was still in front of the marshal's office talking to Sam Myerson, and Desmond looked at her, remembering the feel of her mouth against his. He tried to remind himself of the job that was waiting for him, but somehow it didn't mean much any more.

"I've got to see her a minute," Lonnie said. "I won't be long."

He crossed the street, walking toward the hotel, and Desmond watched him until hoofbeats sounded at the end of the street. Lafe Rawden, with Mitch Corey beside him, and followed by five of the Coffin crew, rode down the center of the dust strip, heading toward the hotel.

Lonnie Everts had reached the hotel but, at sight of Rawden, he stopped and stood in front of the building uncertainly. Lafe Rawden, his face hard in the fading light of day, put his horse into a lope and rode directly toward Lonnie. Watching the rancher, Desmond felt his nerves tighten.

Stopping in front of the hotel, Rawden dismounted. He walked toward Lonnie and said in a loud voice, "You're the one that talked her into leaving me, damn you."

Instead of trying to deny it, Lonnie said evenly, "You never loved her, Rawden. You just wanted her, the way you want everything else."

"She left me a note," Rawden said.

Mitch Corey and the Coffin crew had been holding their horses back, and now Corey glanced toward the saloon. When he saw Desmond on the porch, he spoke to the crew, and all of them reined their mounts over to the walk.

"So you're still around?" Corey said in a low tone.

Desmond stood at the edge of the porch, his eyes on the Coffin foreman, but he was aware of the men behind Corey and his concern was not for himself. It was Lonnie Everts he was thinking about. The kid was carrying a gun, but the way he wore it high on his hip, told Desmond that Lonnie knew nothing about getting a six-shooter out in a hurry.

THE kid had talked up to Rawden, and now he would die—because he wouldn't stand a chance against the rancher. And Desmond couldn't help him, with Mitch Corey and the Coffin crew waiting here to cut him down as soon as he made a move.

Lafe Rawden's voice came through the silence. "I'll fix you so you won't bother me any more."

"Go ahead, Desmond," Mitch Corey said tauntingly. "Pull your gun and let's get it over with."

Desmond hadn't seen Sam Myerson and Kathy Everts running down the street, but now the marshal spoke from the end of the porch. "Let's keep those guns holstered, boys."

The marshal and Kathy had rifles in their hands. Even before Myerson had finished talking, the batwings behind Desmond parted and Hastings, the saloonman, followed by the three ranchers—Holmes, Bracket, and Lesley—stepped onto the porch. All four of them holding guns.

Mitch Corey, counting on the crew to back him, was already making his play. The foreman drew and got in a quick shot that missed. Then Desmond's gun came up. He fired, and the bullet knocked Mitch Corey out of the saddle. He hit the ground, rolled over once and lay still.

Desmond's eyes went to the hotel in time to see Lafe Rawden reaching for his gun. The rancher was fast, and his weapon was swinging up while Lonnie was still trying to get his own free of the holster. Then a rifle cracked

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from an upstairs window of the hotel, and Rawden stiffened as the bullet hit him. He staggered back into the street and tried to raise his gun, but his strength was gone. After a moment he fell to the ground.

The Coffin crew were motionless under the threat of the six guns that covered them. One of them, glancing down at Corey's body, said, "Let's get the hell out of here."

They reined their horses around and rode down the street.

Desmond turned to the men behind him. "Looks like you boys kind of changed your minds."

"We got to talking it over after you left," Hastings said. "You made us feel pretty low."

Kathy and Sam Myerson came up. "Kathy got her rifle and started down here," the marshal said, smiling faintly, "so I figured I couldn't let her come alone."

Lonnie Everts and Della Rawden were standing in front of the hotel now. Lonnie had one arm around the girl's shoulders, trying to comfort her.

It would take her a while to get over all this, Desmond thought, but in time she'd forget about it, and she and Lonnie would work things out.

As soon as they could, Kathy and Desmond got off by themselves. "I guess you'll be riding on now," she said.

He shook his head, and smiled at her. "I still owe you a months' work, and a lot can happen in that time."

The look in her eyes was all the promise he needed.

Coming up in the next issue

RIDE THE RED HILLS

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A Western Short Story

By J. L. BOUMA

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"I've seen some crazy cowhands," Judy said, "but you're the worst."

Sam Cory the Second

By KENNETH L. SINCLAIR

FINDING the house he was looking for, Sam Cory pulled his horse to a pitching stop right under the sign that hung from the big tree in front of the place. "J. J. Parker," it said. "Real Estate, Cattle Bought & Sold, Dressmaking & Alterations." Sam stepped down from his saddle and, not bothering about the gate, jumped over the low fence and went up the walk.

The front door was open, so he went on into a room that seemed to be an office. It was fixed up with a desk, some chairs, filing cabinets, and inkwells, and a pretty brown-haired girl who was at a sewing machine.

JUDY JUNE PARKER was a little confused about which man was Sam Cory . . . but she had no doubts at all about which one she loved

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The girl looked up and said, "Good morning, sir. What can I do for you?"

Any other time, Sam would have had a smart-alecky comeback for that. Looking at this girl, though, was like coming suddenly into sunshine after being underground for a long while.

When he got his breathing back he said, "I reckon you must be the dressmaking department, miss. Where's this J. J. Parker? Trot him out, and you can watch what happens to a skunk who sells off two hundred head of somebody else's cattle!"

The lady tapped a finger against her cheek. "And who might you be?"

"I'm Sam Cory." Suddenly remembering what little manners he owned, he took off his hat, revealing his black, unruly hair. "Miss, I'm real anxious to meet that thief, so if you'll kindly—"

"Ha, ha," she said. "My, how you've changed, just overnight. I liked you better the way you were, Mr. Cory, when your ears didn't stick out so." Her dark eyes gave Sam a scornful and unhurried once over. "You look nicer when you weren't so skinny, too."

She flipped a lever on the sewing machine, yanked a piece of material out of it, and stood up. "I've seen a lot of crazy cowhands around this town, but I've never known one of them to try to palm himself off as someone else. For your information, whoever you are, I happen to be well acquainted with Mr. Cory. Also, I happen to be Judy June Parker, the person who sold those cows, Mr. Cory didn't want to bother with."

Sam's jaw dropped. He was having more trouble with his breathing, too. This Judy June was around twenty or so, medium tall and slim, but filling her simple dress in a way that would make any alert man look twice. There was a suggestion of a cleft in her chin, a softness about her mouth. But it wasn't any simple sum of those things that hit Sam Cory. It was a mystic, glowing something that plucked a chord of music deep inside him.

All he could do was croak, "Why, Judy June, you're beautiful!"

Color touched her cheeks. "Let's stick to the subject, shall we? I'm J. J. Parker, and I haven't time for jokes." Smiling once more, she let him see the sparkle of the ring on her finger. "I've got to get this dress done before Saturday, when Mr. Cory and I are getting married. So scat, please."

Sam didn't exactly leer, but the look that came to his homely face was enough to make her retreat behind her sewing machine. "So you and I are getting married," he said.

"Hey!" she cried, evading his reach. "Granddad!"

A door at the back of the office room swung open. A wizened old man in a wheelchair rolled himself through, swung around by grabbing one wheel, and lifted the sawed-off shotgun he had on his lap.

"Hold still, stranger," he commanded. "Being in business like she is, Judy June gets bothered by cranks now and then, and I'm right here to deal with 'em. What's this one got on his mind, honey?"

Judy June seemed to be having trouble with her own breathing. She lifted a hand to her throat and said, "This one's *really* mixed-up. He thinks he's Sam Cory!"

It was more than a man could take all at one time, losing his cattle and falling in love and finding that somebody had borrowed his name. "Damn it," Sam said, "I am Sam Cory!"

Fishing a thick envelope out of his shirt pocket, he started to hand it to the old codger, then backed hastily away from the raised shotgun and gave it to the girl instead.

She took it like it might bite her, and peered inside it with big brown eyes that became very wide. "Paychecks, Granddad, a whole raft of them, from something called the Cresson Mine, payable to—Samuel Cory!"

The old-timer's shotgun wavered. "Your Sam never worked in a mine, so those checks didn't come from his pocket. There're two Sam Corys, that's what." He squinted at Sam. "If you're a cattleman, what were you doing down in a mine?"

"Getting my stake for ranching."

Sam went on to explain how he had concluded that most young bucks who wanted to get a start as ranchers went at it backwards. Either they worked as cowhands and tried to save money—which might be fine

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if they lived to be a hundred and eighty—or they struck right out and bought big chunks of land and then were kept so mortgage-ridden they couldn't stock it.

Sam had had a different idea. He had worked at a high-paying job, bought his cattle first, and arranged to have them grazed on shares by an old Mexican, near this town of Cactus. That way, he would get the benefit of the herd's natural increase—and a little profit, too—while he hustled back to the mine to earn money for his land. It should have worked out fine.

"Now," he finished up, "when I come down here to look for a ranch to buy, old Jose Murillo tells me that my cows have been sold out from under me by J. J. Parker. Jose never did get a look at this Sam Cory of yours, all he saw was a bill of sale he couldn't read. It looks as if you folks run a businesslike place here. Do you have a copy of that bill of sale?" He reached out for his checks, and got them back.

JUDY JUNE went over to a cabinet, pulled a paper out of a drawer, and handed it defiantly to Sam. "That's not my signature," he told her. It happens there was a big explosion in the mine a few months back. I was caught in it and, while I was laid up, my name got put on the list of deaths by mistake. They made another mistake when they dropped a middle initial I don't own into it —Samuel B. Cory, just as it reads on this paper. It seems that somebody saw a chance to use my name. Did he show you any proof that he owned the cattle?"

"Well, no," Judy said, in a very small voice. "I looked up the brand registry and found that Star C was owned by Sam Cory, so I thought—" She looked at the old man. "Oh, Granddad, I'm in the soup!"

"You sure are," Sam said, folding his arms.

"I'll go get the other Sam," she said, starting toward the door.

"No, you don't!" Sam said, stopping her. "You aren't going to warn him that I'm here. Keep busy on that dress. You'll be needing it, come Saturday. Do you have all our wedding invitations out?"

"But you're not the one I'm supposed to marry. Oh, darn you!" Her eyes wavered, and she gave the old man an appealing look. "He really is crazy!"

The old man broke his shotgun, took out the loads, and looked them over sadly. "Those are the ones," he observed, "who generally get their way. Better watch out for him, Judy June."

"Won't do any good to warn her," Sam said, feeling brash in spite of the jolts he'd had. "She's promised to marry Sam Cory, and I'm him! Where'll I find that skunk?"

"You might try the hotel," the old man said dryly. "If I had legs that'd work I'd trot along to see the fun."

Sam was stepping into his saddle under the big sign outside, when his suspicious eye caught sight of the cowhand who was riding down the street. From the back, the man looked exactly like one Sam had seen lounging around Jose Murillo's place. The cowhand was trying to hurry without seeming to, and he wasn't looking around at all.

By the time Sam got his horse turned and started out, the cowhand was jumping from his saddle in front of a saloon. Without bothering to tie the animal, he ran inside.

Sam shrugged. Cowhands got mighty anxious to wash the dust from their gullets, sometimes. Sam jogged down along, scanning both sides of the street in search of the hotel. He'd been in too much of a hurry, the time he delivered his cattle to Murillo's place, to pay a visit to this burg; but now he located the hotel, two buildings past the saloon, and went in.

The lobby was empty, so he tapped the desk bell until a sleepy-eyed clerk finally emerged from somewhere out back. "I'm looking for Sam Cory," Sam said.

The clerk yawned, shoving his shirttail into his pants. "Room Fourteen, end of the hall upstairs. He won't be up yet, this time of day."

"He'll get wakeful when he sees me," Sam predicted, as he started up the stairway.

When he knocked on the door of Room Fourteen he heard a stirring inside, and the creak of a bedspring. The door swung open. This Sam Cory might be an imposing sight when he slicked up and sober. He was around

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thirty, mustached and sideburned, with those rakish good looks that ought to warn women, but never seem to. He was wearing a robe, with no gun showing, so Sam shoved him back into the room.

The man swayed and blinked, muttering a protest that gave Sam a snootful of whisky-laden breath. "Hey, who do you think you are?"

"I'm Sam Cory. You and I better have a talk?" Sam reached around in back of him to close the door.

A spur jingled faintly in the room. It wasn't one of Sam's. He started to wheel around, reaching for his gun, but right then a charge of dynamite seemed to go off inside his head.

He thought he was back in the mine, in darkness that was filled with dust and powder fumes and the screams of men who were caught under rock. The scrambling died down and the voices merged into one voice that spoke coolly and incisively, not sounding drunk any more at all.

"Good thing you got here so fast, Ed, and hid behind that door. Did Murillo wise up?"

"That thickheaded Mex doesn't know what to make of it, Dalt. The way you handled it, with the Parker filly making the cattle sale and old José never getting a look at you, was smart. When this jigger blew in, claiming he never signed any bill of sale, the Mex—"

"This bird stopped by the Parker place, you say?"

"That's what I said. I knew the fat was going to be in the fire, so I followed him to town. I got past the Parker place while he was in there, but he came out again before I could get to the hotel. So I dodged into the saloon instead, went right on through it, and hustled up the back stairs of this place. The question is, what do we do with him now?"

There was a silence. Sam found that he was lying on the carpet. His head seemed full of strange and painful noises but, he slid a hand to his holster. It was empty.

"This is awkward," Dalt's voice said. "I can handle the Parker girl. The old man can't get out of that house of theirs, so he'll be all right. Damn it, this man is supposed to be dead! Are you sure he's Sam Cory?"

"Well, José recognized him right off."

Dalt swore, in a gentlemanly way. "I've been taking my time, thinking everything was safe. Now, if he gets away from us and does some talking before we can clear out of here—"

"With the Parker skirt," Ed put in, chuckling.

"With the lady. Get a livery rig, Ed, we'll take him out of town somewhere. Better tap him again; he's beginning to stir around. Not too hard, mind. If he dies on us here we won't be able to make it look like we're helping a sick friend."

Sam tried to roll away from the blow of the gun barrel, but he wasn't quick enough. His dazed head wouldn't command his muscles.

HE WAS back in that mine again. Everything was dark and he couldn't move. He was wedged in between two big rocks, and some fool on the level below was shooting off dynamite, one charge after another. The explosions went on and on, jolting him until he was sure the next one would jar his head off. There wasn't that much powder in the world.

He started pulling himself up through darkness, trying to get away from the jolting. Trees, in the blinding light of day, were marching past on either side of him. Fool trees, walking around. . . . no, they weren't walking, either. There was a team of horses out there ahead of him, and he was in a rig of some kind, one that was climbing a steep and rocky road. He was wedged between two men so that he couldn't fall over. Keeping his chin on his chest, he closed his eyes tightly while he pulled himself together.

Those voices were talking again. "How much farther, Ed?" Dalt asked nervously.

"Top of this hill," the voice on the other side of Sam replied. "There's an old mine shaft, seven hundred feet deep. By the time he hits the bottom of that, he'll mash like an egg. Looks like he's coming out of it again. He's a hard-headed jigger."

"Tap him. I don't want him to know it when he drops."

Ed laughed. "Squeamish, eh?"

"All right, so I'm squeamish," Dalt said

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angrily. "If that other matter hadn't come up, making it worthwhile to—"

Sam didn't listen any more. He was aware of the stirring of Ed's body as the cowhand reached for his gun. And he was thinking, another damn mine. He exploded like dynamite between the two men, shoving violently against Ed, so that the cowhand fell out of the rig and landed on the rocks.

Dalt jumped up, sawing the lines to control the team, while he stared at Sam in frozen amazement and fear. Sam hit him, but the blow was weak and not very accurate. Dalt grabbed the seat rail to keep from falling out, and kicked at Sam with a high-priced boot.

He didn't have far to go. Ed was shooting at him by the time he reached the brush that grew around the tree trunks, and he plunged into it. Bullets clipped leaves all around him; but then Ed had to stop shooting while he reloaded. Sam ran on and on until he fell down the side of a gully.

From somewhere back toward the road there came the sound of Ed crashing through the brush, swearing as he came. Sam dragged himself up onto his feet and staggered down the gully. He was barely making it when he came into a little open space and saw a horse quartering downslope at one side.

Judy June Parker was on the horse. "Sam,

Reluctant Romance

By LIMERICK LUKE

There was a young cowboy named Paul,
Who didn't like cowgirls at all—
Till one of them picked him
To be her sweet victim,
And led Paul right into the stall!

Sam grabbed him, but found no gun rig under his long coat. Glancing swiftly around, Sam saw that the rig had left Ed behind, and that the cowhand was now scrambling to his feet.

I should have done it different, Sam thought distantly. I should have boosted Dalt out, and then taken my chances on getting Ed's gun.

It was too late for that now. Ed was bawling, "Get clear of him, Dalt! Get down, so I can shoot him."

Dalt got right down, crouching against the dashboard. Sam leaped over him and hit the ground. Keeping the rig between Ed and himself while he ran, he jumped over rocks and made for the trees.

over here!" she gasped. "Get up behind me, quick. Granddad wouldn't let me leave the house, but I sneaked out in time to see them taking you out of town, and so I followed. If only I'd brought along the gun! Sam, can't you hear me?"

He grinned up at her, feeling foolish as his legs gave way. Then he sensed that she was on the ground beside him, boosting him up. He did all he could to help, and somehow he made it. Then he was in a saddle. It would have been pleasant, having her arm tight about him to hold the reins and to keep him from keeling over, if it hadn't been for the jolting of the horse's gait. A man with his head full of quivering pain couldn't stand much more of that. Everything went black.

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THE woman was built big, wide, and bulgy. Her face was burned by sun and wind, and her gray hair was piled in a careless swirl on the top of her head. Sam blinked at her while she slid a massive arm under his shoulders and hoisted him up so she could pour some whisky into him.

Stirring in the bed, he muttered, "Judy, you sure have changed."

"Lie still, now," she commanded gruffly. "I'm Allie Jones and this is my A Bar J ranch." She let him down onto the pillow gently.

Sam didn't lie still. Propping himself on his elbows, he demanded, "How'd I get here? Where's Judy?"

"Judy June got you away from those slickers and brought you here. She's gone back to town to get the doctor and send word to the law. We taxpayers have been hollering for years to get a deputy in Cactus, but we don't have one yet."

"You let her leave alone?" Sam growled. "You old fool, she'll never make it."

"Shush your mouth. I may be old, but not fool enough to argue with a young female when she's got her back up. Judy June said to tell you she's sorry about everything and she'll try to make amends."

"Where're my clothes," Sam demanded. "I have to get out of here."

"You have to lie still, or else I'll bat you one!" Allie stepped back, her jaw tilting formidably, and rolled a greasy shirtsleeve up her arm. "I've been fixing my windmill today, but I've got enough steam left to deal with a dozen scrawny cowboys!"

Sam grinned up at her. "You can't scare me, ma'am. I'm dead!"

"You seemed darn close to it, there at first. Judy June was one worried little lady, till I told her I'd seen plenty of men that'd been bashed on the head. It's suppertime now. Are you feeling well enough to sit up and take some nourishment?"

"Sure am," Sam told her slyly.

"I'll go fix it, then."

Allie Jones tramped heavily out of the room. The minute she was gone Sam got out of bed, reeled dizzily across to the closet in his underwear, and found his clothes.

The first thing he did was look in the pocket of the shirt. "It's gone!" he yelped.

Allie's broad face appeared in the doorway. "What's gone?"

"The envelope that had all my paychecks in it."

"Well, Judy and I didn't roll you. What paychecks?"

"The ones from the mine I worked at, up in Cripple Creek. I saved up the checks instead of cashing 'em, figuring they were safer to carry than money. But they aren't with another Sam Cory around to cash 'em!"

"What were you doing in a mine, cowboy?"

"Earning money. I was a powdermonkey; the dangerous job are the ones that pay good. That thief not only sold my cows, he got my money to boot."

"Well, don't just stand there and stamp your feet. Now that you're up, put on your clothes and come eat. It's not respectable for me to have you sitting at my table in your underwear."

All through the meal Allie Jones kept glancing out through the kitchen window. But, though the sun was going down, Judy June didn't ride in. "Well, anyway," Allie said with a forced smile, "your namesake and his sidekick haven't shown up to bother us."

"His name's Dalt," Sam said darkly, gulping his coffee and getting to his feet. "They took out after Judy, that's what they did. Ma'am do you have a gun and a horse you could lend me?"

"I'm not in the lending business," Allie said gruffly. A hint of a smile flickered about her mouth as she added, "I'll make you a deal, though. I never had any use for six-guns, but I've got a couple of Winchesters around. You can use one of 'em, providing I get to use the other."

"On what? Hey, you're not going along with me!"

Allie aimed a work-callused finger at Sam. "Look here, young feller. I've tried most everything in the book and a few things that aren't, including being a dancehall queen once." She patted her hair. "I was a looker in those days!

"Now I'm down to a twenty-cow ranch,

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and I'm raring to get away from cows and busted windmills for a little while. Besides, I've had four husbands and two of 'em were whizzers, and I know what a skunk like that Dalt, with his looks and his sweet talk, can do to a girl like Judy June. I'm as worried about her as you are.

"She's worked hard, at everything that would fetch in money, to support herself and that busted-down grandfather. Dalt had her dazzled and she admits it, but even when a woman knows she's being a fool, sometimes she'll go right on being foolish." Allie got up, her massive jaw thrust out. "You and I are going off to this war together!"

It was almost dark when they rode into the town. Allie slanted a watchful look around and said, "Yonder's the cashier of the bank. Let's see if he seen anything of those checks." Reining hard over, she spurred her horse right onto the plank sidewalk, blocking the path of a prim little man. "Hold on a minute, Charlie!"

The cashier stopped, blinking up at her. "What's this, now, Mrs. Jones?"

Allie shifted ponderously in her saddle. "Did you cash some checks today, for a man that calls himself Sam Cory?"

"Why, yes, we did, several dozen of them —a large amount of money, all told. Something wrong, Mrs. Jones?"

"You name me something that's right," Allie said, pulling her horse around, "and you can have it!"

Galloping on down the street, with Allie riding capably beside him, Sam headed for the Parker place. He didn't jump over the fence this time. Allie got to it ahead of him, opened the gate, and strode on up the path, carrying the coiled catch-rope she'd taken from her saddle.

Judy June's grandfather was wheeling his chair back and forth on the porch. "She's gone!" he yipped to Allie and Sam. "She went off on the afternoon stage with Sam Cory—that other one, I mean."

"Y'mean she went willingly?" Sam croaked.

"She went off and left, just like that?" Allie demanded. "Huh!" Slapping her catch-rope against her riding skirt, she bent an angry look toward Sam. "Here I was figuring I might get to rope that son. Well, what was it I told you about those sweet-talking ones, hey?"

AFTER a couple of tries, Sam managed to swallow. "How long ago did she leave?" he asked.

The old man pulled out a hunting-case watch and craned around to see its face in the gloom. "The stage always leaves at four-thirty, and gets to the county seat at midnight. It was way late getting started this time, though. It was five-forty when it pulled out, so it's about two hours ahead of you. If you were to—"

"Hush your rambling, Newt," Allie commanded. "When did Judy June come home?"

"Way past noon. Cory and a feller that looked like a cowhand brought her in a livery rig. Cory come right in the house with her. I don't know what's come over that girl, I swear I don't. She let him keep kissing her right there in the office, and when I told her it wasn't proper she told me to go wheel myself into her bedroom and fetch her suitcase. She was blushing and carrying on like a bride."

Allie snorted and gave Sam another meaningful look. "Never mind all the details, Newt. When did they leave?"

"I'm getting to that, Allie. I'd no more'n gotten into her room when she came busting in and started throwing things in her suitcase. She kissed me goodby and started to tell me something, but right then Cory came in and told her to hustle. They went out together and got in the livery rig. The other man came around from behind the house somewhere and drove 'em downtown to wait for the stage." He looked at his watch again. "It was three-fifteen—no, three-twenty. I tell you folks, I don't like it a bit. Judy June never was that kind of girl."

Sam turned around and started running toward his horse. He had just reached the gate, with Allie lumbering along behind him, when the oldtimer on the porch yelped, "Hey, I'm not finished telling you all that she said."

"Save it for next time," Sam said, and leaped onto his horse.

After they had ridden about a mile out of the town, Allie reined up suddenly. "Hey,

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we're going at this wrong. There's not much chance of catching up with that stage this way. It carries the mail, and they make three changes of horses between here and the county seat, and gallop all the way, except on hills. The road makes a big swing around the Coyote Buttes, though. If we were to head right across and ride like hell, which we can do now that the moon's coming up, we could cut in ahead of 'em and get all set for 'em. I know a dandy place over there for a road-agent caper."

"Slow down!" Sam warned. "Holding up stages that carry mail can be a dangerous business."

"Don't get balky on me, cowboy. Money and a young and pretty female—were there ever better reasons for holding up a stage? I've tried almost everything, but this is the first time I ever got in on a hold-up from the shooting end. If you're not going I'll do it myself. I'm a rough old woman but I have a lot of affection for that young lady. I don't aim to see her do something she'll regret."

Sam said, "I believe you would, at that! Well, it's my money and my girl—anyway she's going to be. Lead out, old woman!"

Sam didn't try to keep tally of the miles they rode, at breakneck pace, through those moonlit hills. He had enough to do, keeping up with Allie Jones. When finally they cut down into the stage road once more, he scanned its surface anxiously for signs of recent travel, but saw none.

The place Allie picked might have been set up especially for the doings she had in mind. It was at the top of a curving hill where the coach would be going along slowly, and there were big rocks and brush on either side of the road. Allie dismounted, got out a bandanna, and started fixing it for a mask.

"Hey, quit that," Sam said. "You want to get shot?"

Allie sighed and put the bandanna away. "It doesn't seem right to go at a thing like this without the proper fixings. My third husband always— Well, never mind about that. You take this side and I'll take the other one. We'd better keep our horses handy in case things go sour for us."

"You keep out of sight, ma'am," Sam told her. "This is my ruckus, and it's a man's job."

She gave him a forbidding glare. "What makes you think I'm taking orders from any brash young rannihan?"

"Why, ma'am," Sam told her, grinning, "you're so big you might get in my way. Besides, what's Judy going to think of me if it seems I've got to have a woman's help to hold up a little old stage?"

Allie's glare wavered. "Gone on her, aren't you?"

"Plumb gone," Sam said solemnly, "from the first minute I saw her."

Allie got out the bandanna and blew her nose. "It hits 'em like that sometimes. Since you put it that way, I'll see if I can find a rock big enough for me to hide behind. But I'll be watching, just in case."

They had been waiting about twenty minutes when Sam heard the stage come toiling up the grade. When the straining, sweat-glistening horses reached the top he stepped out, Winchester on his arm, and called, "Rest your horses, boys, but don't be afraid. This isn't a holdup."

The driver's booted foot shoved the brake lever far down its notched quadrant, making an angry sound. The shotgun guard, who had been dozing on the seat beside the driver, came awake with a start, began to reach down for his gun, but changed his mind. "If this isn't a holdup," he asked uncertainly, "what the hell is it?"

"A little delay, that's all," Sam said. "You have a passenger who's been using my name so he could latch onto my money." He shifted the Winchester in his hands and levered a shell into the chamber. "Dalt, you and Ed step down from there."

The coach rocked in response to sudden movement inside. Damn, Sam thought swiftly, they'll go out the other side. I should have had Allie watch for that.

A sound of angry voices within the coach —one of them feminine—came to his ears. And then, to his surprise, the door on his side swung open and Dalt stepped gingerly down, lifting his hands and glancing back over his shoulder.

[*Turn to page 80*]

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Everybody's reading

The Searchers

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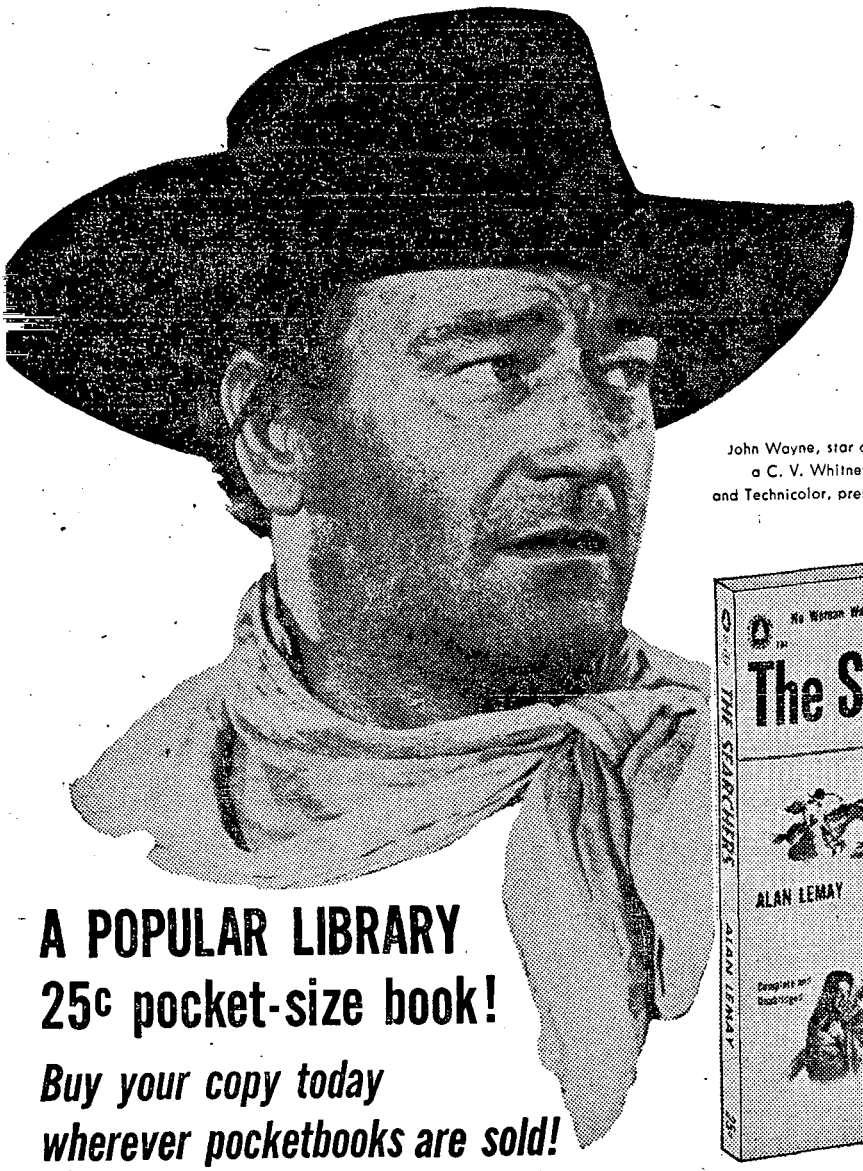

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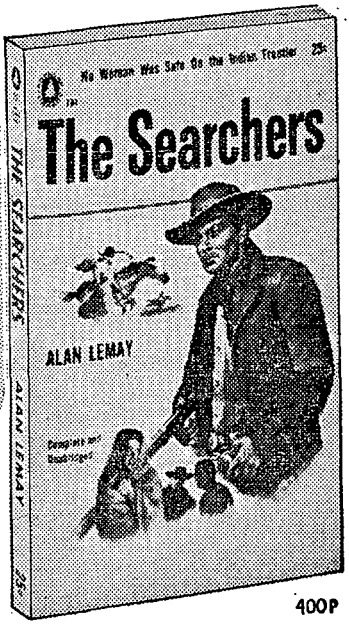

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EYES fixed on the door of the coach in expectation that Ed would come out shooting, Sam came perilously near to missing the sudden movement on the top of the stage. Ed wasn't inside at all, but up there behind the driver and guard, rising up now among the baggage and grinning in triumph as he fired down at Sam.

The bullet missed, narrowly, because Sam was already throwing himself to one side. But the shot startled the horses so that they lunged ahead, yanking the coach. Ed lost his balance, dropped over the far side, jumped up and leaped into the brush.

"I've got him covered, Dalt!" Ed shouted almost at once. "Get his rifle."

That was a bluff, pure and simple. Ed hadn't had time to get into a position from which he could see past the coach.

He could get to it mighty quick, though. Sam had his choice of jumping for cover or holding onto what he had gained. He went after Dalt, running up close beside the coach, watchful for any move that Dalt might make.

Dalt wasn't doing a thing. The twin muzzles of a sawed-off shotgun, with a small, determined, brown-haired head tucked up against its stock, were on him.

"Oh, Sam!" Judy June cried, looking at the right Sam Cory. "He tried to get out on the other side, but I stopped him."

There was a sudden commotion in the brush beside the road. Glancing back past the horses, Sam saw Allie Jones come spurring out in the moonlight, dragging something at the end of her catch-rope. What she had was Ed, his arms pinned to his sides by the loop.

Allie whooped joyfully. "All that calf-roping I've had to do came in handy after all!"

There was a lot of excited talk, after the rest of the passengers had piled out of the coach. The driver and the shotgun guard took charge of Dalt and Ed. Judy June pulled Sam to one side and said, "Sam, they caught me when my horse went lame. I couldn't stand to think about what they'd do if they caught you at Allie's place, and so I made a deal with Sam. I mean, with what's-his-name. I'd go with him, I said, if he'd leave you alone. He was tickled to agree, and I found out why when he cashed all those checks of yours. But I kept playing up to him so I could—"

"Shameless hussy," Allie broke in, right beside them. "Running out on your grandfather like that."

Judy June looked around at Allie. "You know better than that, darn you! I had to do something drastic, didn't I, to get a chance to slip granddad's shotgun into my suitcase? Even at that, Sam nearly caught me at it, and I didn't have a chance to tell granddad what I intended to do with it."

"I'm Sam," Sam said, scowling.

"I mean that other one. Did I hear you call him Dalt? I'm so mixed up about names." Judy June caught her breath. "Well, anyway, what I'd intended to do when we got to the county seat was shove the shotgun against him and holler for the law, and get your money back, Sam. I had to make amends someway. But I'd insisted on keeping the suitcase with me inside the coach, and when you stopped us— Sam, you get over there and get your money from him right now."

"Money'll keep," Sam said, grinning down into her uptilted face. Judy made a startled murmur when he got his arms around her, but a long and thorough kiss stopped that. Her arms wound about his neck. "Oh, Sam!" she gasped. "I've been such a fool. I knew it the minute you came stomping into the office, all mad and homely."

Allie Jones had gotten her bandanna out again. "A homely man," she said loudly, "is like a homely horse. Sometimes they're worth a whole passel of the pretty ones."

Sam whispered in Judy's ear, "Come Saturday—"

She stiffened, stamped her foot. "Now you listen. I'll not be stampeded into marriage."

"You aren't going to dodge, honey. You agreed to marry Sam Cory, didn't you? Well, I'm him!" Slipping the ring from her finger, he tossed it over to one of the grinning stage passengers.

"Oh, darn you!" Judy June said, her cheek against his chest. "You've got me in a corner, and I guess—" She drew back to look up at his head, first one side and then the other. "Oh, dear! Our kids will all have big ears."

"They'd be in a worse fix," Sam remarked brashly, "if they didn't have any ears!"

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Ride, Flaco, Ride

a true story by

Fred Harvey

EVERYONE has heard of the midnight ride of Paul Revere, from Charleston to Lexington, in 1775, to warn that the British were coming. Longfellow, although he paid little attention to fact, immortalized him in a poem.

But there is another ride that our historians overlooked or disregarded as being too insignificant for our history books. It far overshadows Paul Revere and makes his ride comparatively tame in suspense, hardship and danger. It is one of the greatest rides in all American history.

Juan Flaco—or Lean John, as the Californians called him—was in reality John Brown, a wiry, energetic ex-sailor and soldier of fortune, and an expert horseman.

He rode, all told, about six hundred and thirty miles in four days. His courageous, heartbreaking ride from Los Angeles to San Francisco, California, over tortuous mountain trails, arid desert, and hostile countryside, to bring aid to fifty men, should be brought to light. Juan Flaco ought to receive the credit he so richly deserves.

In 1846, prior to the end of the war between the United States and Mexico, Commodore Stockton and General Fremont, through a series of battles, captured the Pueblo of Los Angeles and put martial law into effect to hold down further uprising.

Later, when Stockton and Fremont left for the north, Captain Gillespie, an officer in the marines, was placed in command, with fifty men and with orders to uphold military law. This was a drastic mistake on Stockton's part —leaving fifty men, none too well armed, to uphold law and order in a country that was a hotbed of turbulence and revolution.

Too, Gillespie was unfitted for so delicate a job. He imposed strict regulations upon the inhabitants. He was arrogant, contemptuous and humiliating.

This was more than the Californians could bear. Hatred toward their conquerors, stirred up by the younger and more reckless males,

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knew no bounds. In the heat of anger and under the influence of a daring young Don, some sixty-five armed horsemen attacked Gillespie's headquarters at the foot of the hill. Gillespie and his men were forced to move up the hill and entrench there.

The situation had become serious. By the following day over six hundred men and cannon surrounded the Americans trapped on the hill. With a scant supply of water and ammunition, their chances for survival looked slim. Gillespie, fearing the worst, realized help must arrive quickly or they would all be annihilated. After deliberating the problem, he sent for Juan Flaco.

They talked over the situation, and Gillespie offered Juan five hundred dollars and expenses to go for aid to Commodore Stockton in Monterey. The money was to be paid after completion of the ride.

Taking a handful of cigarette papers from the table, Gillespie wrote on the inside of them, "Believe the Bearer," and stamped them with his seal. Juan marked a black dot on each one and mixed the papers with his own.

This was the only identification he took with him. He could not risk carrying documents that were likely to be found if he were captured by the enemy. This identification would serve as a means of getting aid—horses, shelter and food. "Present one of these to whomever you think trustworthy," he was told.

Juan Flaco decided to use his own white horse. At eight in the evening of September 24 he led his mount quietly down the hill. The shadowy outline of the enemy's camp could be seen below. The moon was pale white. Juan, unarmed except for a *reato,* was relying mostly on his ability to outmaneuver the enemy.

Luck was against him from the beginning. As he came to the foot of the hill, barking dogs gave warning of his approach. He swung into the saddle and spurred his horse savagely. Fifteen lancers on horseback gave pursuit. Shots from their short-range muskets sang dangerously around him.

He bent low over his horse's neck to make a smaller target. For two miles they were literally breathing down his neck. Foot by foot, yard by yard, the Californians matched Flaco's pace. A shot whizzed by, then another. The horse quivered.

Then he saw a deep gulch, just ahead of him. It was too late to stop; the thirteen-foot gap must be spanned. He spurred his horse cruelly, and the magnificent beast leaped ahead, cleared the chasm, and sped on, amidst the cries of the pursuers, who did not dare to follow.

Coming down a steep hill two miles further on, his horse stumbled, fell to its knees, and rolled down the bank. When Flaco got up, he saw that the horse was dead. A large wound gaped in its flank where a stray ball had pierced it. He took off the saddle and hung it on a tree. With spurs in his hands, he ran and stumbled in the half light till he came to the nearest ranch, twenty-seven miles away. He arrived there before daybreak.

To the questioning of the owner, Flaco answered that he was a storekeeper and that a Frenchman had robbed him. Four miles back when he had stopped to tighten a cinch, his horse had been frightened by a bear and had run off. Flaco was given breakfast and a good horse. Without too much trouble he arrived at Santa Barbara at eleven in the evening of the 25th.

At the army barracks, he identified himself to the officers in charge, by means of the cigarette papers, and told them of the trouble in Los Angeles. Fresh horses and food were furnished, and at daybreak Flaco went on his way.

He made good time, but lost it when he rode miles out of his way to avoid enemy patrols. Coming to another ranch, he gave the owner a cigarette paper and retold his story. With food under his belt, and four fresh horses, he went on.

More ranches, more stops and near skirmishes with patrols followed. At each friendly ranch he left tired horses and was given new ones in return. It had been three days since he left Los Angeles. At last he sighted Monterey in the distance. He spurred his mount up to the army post.

He gave out more cigarette papers. "Where can I find Commodore Stockton?"

The officer looked at Flaco's tired face sympathetically. "The Commodore sailed for San Francisco two hours ago."

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"San Francisco! That's one hundred and eighty miles!"

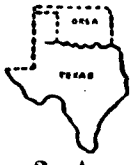
The exhausted Flaco slept for three hours, until sunrise. When he awoke a horse waited for him—a long-legged, sturdy ranch horse.

At San José he was detained four hours. During another exchange of horses he lost two hours more. At eight that evening he arrived at the waterfront in San Francisco and stood on Sand Beach. He had made the last hundred and eighty miles in seven and three-quarters hours' actual riding time. It was foggy. There was no ship in sight. He slept on the beach.

Early the following morning he finally found the man he had ridden so long and so tirelessly to see.

He turned over the remaining cigarette papers to Stockton, along with a modest account of his phenomenal exploit.

KNOW YOUR WEST



1. Which of their major big cities do Texans often call "Big D?"

2. A small "mill," turned with a handle, was attached to the side of old-time chuckwagons for what purpose?

3. The women commonly called "The Harvey Girls" in the Southwest were which of the following: waitresses, dance-hall girls, or cowgirls?

4. Are all purebred Angus cattle black?

5. Southwestern blue quail are also called scaled quail: (1) because of their scaley legs, (2) because the pattern of their breast feathers resembles fish scales, or (3) because their call sounds like the musical scale?

6. What is the name of the sleeveless coat or raincoat worn by Mexican *vaqueros* instead of a slicker?

7. The word "flanker" is used in two different meanings to designate cowboys engaged in what two ways in cow work?

8. Dick Brewer, an associate of Billy the Kid, and Buckshot Roberts, an enemy of the Kid, were both killed in the Battle of Blazer's Mill near Mescalero, in what territory, now a state?

9. The first cattle were unloaded on the North American Continent at Vera Cruz by a Spaniard named Don Gregorio de Villalobos in 1521. Where is Vera Cruz?

10. When you hear a cowboy say he "choosed" somebody, what does he mean?

—Rattlesnake Robert

You will find the answers to these questions on page 113. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

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OUT OF THE CHUTES

IN TWO newspaper stories we've read, it said that in West Texas "you can cuss the heat, the dust, Pappy O'Daniel and even Tom Connally, but one word that ain't nice about Toots Mansfield, and you better be fast on the draw." We're willing to go along with that.

In West Texas they're wary of politicians, and they love steer-ropers. So it stands to reason they're real proud of their tall, lanky native son who is the most consistently expert steer- and calf-roper in rodeo. Other champions may come and go, but Toots seems to go on forever.

Toots is now 41, and he figures it was well over 30 years ago that he first started casting loops at goats and fence posts when he was a ranch boy in Bandera, Tex.

Since then he's worked and won more rodeos than we could list in these columns. He's won jackpot steer-roping contests against such ropers as Everett Shaw, Ike Rude, Jiggs Burke, Shoat Webster and Gerald Tully—once against all of them in one show. He has competed 18 times at Madison Square Garden, and seven times he finished first.

Toots has never matched the eight-second calf-roping record, but he's lost track of how many times he's completed his hooley in ten seconds, which is plenty fast enough to win most go-rounds.

Maybe the most impressive figure we can quote is the $300,000 he's won in his 9 years in rodeo, in spite of the fact that he seldom tries to hit all the big shows.

Toots even took a couple of years out, starting after the season in 1950, to try his hand at ranching. He used his rodeo earnings as a grub stake and bought an 18,000 acre ranch near Big Spring, Tex., which he stocked with sheeps and Brahmas.

He told everyone interested that his wife didn't like traveling and they were going to settle down for a spell. He figured he could keep his hand in at rodeoing by competing in local shows that weren't more than overnight away.

Maybe he could have, but he never got much of a chance to prove it. The next couple of years were bad drought years, even for Texas. Toots finally had to give up ranching, and he found living by the rope again a lot less worrisome.

Mrs. Mansfield is also a Texas native, though she and Toots met in New York in 1939, when she was a rodeo queen and he was a rodeo cowboy.

Maybe it's because of the romantic association that she never minds coming to the Madison Square Garden rodeo with him in the fall. Now that their little daughter, Deane, is eleven, she comes along too, and the family spends their leisure time going to museums and taking in the Broadway shows.

Toots keeps in shape during the three weeks in New York by scorning elevators. In his hotel, he likes a room on the eighth or ninth floor. That's just about the right distance for climbing at a sprint, he says. When Deane wanted to go to the top of the Empire State building, though, Toots took the elevator just like anybody else.

He dresses the same whether he's in New York or Texas, with broad-brimmed hat and skinny pants, and he wears sun glasses all the time, in sun, wind, rain or smog. He causes plenty of heads to turn, as he saunters through the modern art collection at the Metropolitan Museum or walks down the aisle of a Broadway theater.

He's one of the most popular cowboys among the cowboys themselves, though he's far from being a glad-hander or a back slapper. He's a steady church-goer, a teetotaler (though he's no missionary against other people's drinking,) and even a missed loop

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or some other bit of bad luck won't wring a cuss word from his lips.

But the fact that the other top-hands like him as well as admire him is proved by their electing him several times to the presidency of the RCA. They might have gone on electing him year in, year out, except that he withdrew his name from the ballot a couple of years ago.

He plays a poor game of golf and cares nothing for other sports, because he likes roping so much.

"I kind of feel like I'm wasting my time at most sports," he says. "Roping is just as good exercise, more fun for me, and more profitable."

So whenever Toots has any spare time between roping contests, he goes and practices roping. Before any rodeo he enters, while he's still home in Big Spring, you'll find him in the empty arena at the fair grounds. He'll be mounted on his big black quarter horse, Wild Goose, and he'll spend half the day roping and tying calves, just for practice and exercise.

"There's no sport in the world which you can learn once and never forget," Toots insists. "Baseball players take batting practice every day, fighters go into training before a fight, and rodeo cowboys with any sense don't let a day go by without some sort of practice."

He even puts constant practice ahead of natural talent for making a champion calf-roper. "That, and a good horse—one who can read your mind."

If you think this adds up to a stubborn and tenacious fellow, you ain't heard nothing yet. Like the postman, weather can't stop him. He has roped in a hailstorm, a snowstorm and in a sandstorm so thick he could barely see the calf, let alone the hardy souls in the grandstand. "And what *they* could see of the rodeo," says Toots, "I really can't imagine."

Neither can his own injuries stop him. Once he broke his thumb by catching it in his own rope.

He was fit to be tied—but so was the calf, a few seconds later.

Another time his horse fell on him and fractured his leg in the first go-round of a Texas rodeo.

When the leg was taped up, he roped eleven more steers and calves, and took first place in both events.

This year at Madison Square Garden, Toots was sound of limb, and he started like a horse afire, winning the first go-round, taking second place in the second, and third in the fourth. He tapered off in the last two, but still held third for the event, with about a 16-second average on six calves. He went back to Texas with about $2,800 in prize money.

In the last days of the RCA championship races for 1955, Toots was neck-and-neck with Lanham Riley for second place in calf-roping. At this writing we don't know who won out, though we can say it's unlikely that Toots won first place, being over 6,000 behind the leader, Dan Oliver.

Toots, however, is a great fellow for a spurt at the finish, when he knows it's required of him. In 1950, after the New York rodeo, he was a few hundred points behind in the calf-roping score, but he more than made that up by winning over a thousand in San Francisco.

Being strictly a roper, Toots will never win All-Around Cowboy now, because the new RCA rules specify that a cowboy, to be literally "all-around" must win points in more than one type of event. For Toots that would mean competing in bronc- or bull-riding besides calf- and steer-roping. He prefers to be a specialist.

But before this rule was made, Toots might have won the big championship and once, in 1948, he almost did, though he didn't know it at the time. He was within 400 points of the top score, and competing in one more rodeo could have given him the championship. But due to the tardiness of a few rodeos in reporting their results, Toots had no idea he was so close, so he passed up a few end-of-the-year shows.

The most he'll say about this disappointment, however, is that he "kind of wishes" he hadn't missed his chance.

Adios,

THE EDITORS

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She feels sorry for me, as if I were some stray dog, Lee thought

REVOLT

By RAY G. ELLIS

LEE BARRETT stood at the window of the Wyoming Saloon, peering over the eye-high painted portion of the glass. In his hand was a water glass with an inch of whisky at the bottom. He lifted it to his lips and drank without taking his eyes from the street.

He was stocky in build, and his rusty hair was too long, hanging ragged in the back and at his ears. His face was square and he had a wide, mobile mouth.

"Look at 'em," Barrett said with disgust.

But Hugh Dennis, behind the bar, heard a faint note of longing, too. He shook his head and continued to wipe out the glass he had been working on for the last half hour.

LEE BARRETT HATED everybody in town, and wanted revenge . . . but not when his way of striking back led to cold-blooded murder

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Without turning, Lee Barrett went on talking, the glass in his hand forgotten for the moment. "She hangs on Vic Ranier as if he were the only man in the world. But what does she say when I ask her to go to the dance? 'I'm sorry,' she says. 'I'm busy.' " He mimicked Emily Harrington's tiny voice when he spoke his last words, but there was no humor in the imitation, only bitterness.

He turned suddenly and looked at Hugh Dennis. "And do you know why she's busy? Because I grew up in this dump, that's why. Her old man owns the Emporium, and that makes her too good for the likes of me."

Hugh put the polished glass on the back bar and flung the towel down on the polished mahogany before him. "Why don't you just forget about her, Lee?" he suggested. "You've got some idea that if you take her to the dance it'll change you, make you something you're not. You're just asking for trouble by going on this way."

Barrett tossed off the rest of the whisky in the glass and slammed it down angrily on the bar top.

"You're satisfied with this hole-in-the-wall," he railed, with a violent distaste that made Hugh wince. "It's four o'clock in the afternoon and there's not a soul in here but you and me. You'll be lucky if you get five customers before you close up for the night. I tell you I want a damn sight more out of life than this rotting saloon."

Hugh's voice was quieter when he spoke, and his eyes were filled with the pain of an inner wound. He said, "I did the best I could while I was raising you, Lee. I know this place isn't the best in which to bring up a boy, but—"

"Aw, quit looking for medals," Lee told him. The anger in his voice subsided and he added, "I'm not blaming you, Hugh." The voice rose again. "But I'm not dirt to be kicked around by Miss High-and-Mighty of Split Rock. What's Vic Ranier—deputy sheriff, that's all."

"And the sheriff's son," Hugh pointed out.

"Some deputy," Lee commented. "The bank gets held up and what does he do but stand around?"

"Save your comments, Lee," Hugh interrupted, standing on tiptoe and peering out the front window. "Here come Noah and Vic now."

Noah Ranier was tall and lean, graying at the temples but still agile at forty-five. His face was deeply tanned, and it was cut with deep vertical seams. His eyes were gray-blue and direct.

Vic Ranier was about the same age as Lee, which made him twenty-three. He was slightly shorter than his father, although he was still taller than Lee by several inches. But he was broader than his father. His eyes were the same gray-blue color, but they moved about more, nervously, as if he couldn't stand to look at anything or anyone for too long a time.

Noah Ranier lifted a hand toward Hugh and said, "How about a couple of beers, Hugh?"

Vic sniffed the stale air of the old building, his lips curled in disgust. "You can hold mine," he said shortly, and everybody understood the insinuation.

Noah's face took on color as he reached for the glass of beer. He said, turning to Lee, "How're things with you, Lee?"

"You didn't come in here to pass the time of day, Ranier," Barrett said curtly. "What do you want?"

Vic Ranier bristled and stepped close to Lee. "Don't get smart with the law, Barrett."

"Vic!" Noah Ranier said the name sharply, and the young deputy stepped back to a position beside his father. Noah turned to Barrett.

"I'll tell you what I want, Lee. We followed Mike Cohane and those other two men into the hills and lost them. I want you to tell me all you know about them. They were were your friends."

Lee laughed in the sheriff's face, a dry, grating sound. Noah Ranier represented the other part of the town, the part that wiped their feet on the likes of him, the part of town that lifted their noses when they passed the Wyoming Saloon.

"Some friends, weren't they, Sheriff?" Lee chuckled. The mirthless smile dropped from his wide mouth, and it turned down in a scowl. "You're the law. You find them."

"I could arrest you as an accomplice, Lee,"

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Noah threatened, his voice quiet but sharp-edged.

The sheriff's threat brought a strange sort of elation to Lee. Ranier had nothing on him, could do nothing to him, and it made him feel reckless. He said, "What'll you tell the judge, Sheriff? That I told Mike Cohane that the Split Rock Bank was an easy mark?" He grinned. "Because I did, you know."

VIC RANIER looked at his father, his face flushed in hard anger. "You want me to take him in, Dad?" he asked, the anticipation strong in his voice.

Lee chuckled aloud at this idea. Noah Ranier shook his head. Then he said, "I hate to see you this way, Lee. You've got good stuff in you, I think, but you're letting your bitterness guide your thinking. Give people a chance to know you instead of flying off the handle everytime somebody opens his mouth."

Lee hooked a thumb over his gunbelt. "Well, now, Sheriff, that's a right nice speech you made there. But why don't you save it for church? You're wasting it in here. I made my play to haul myself across the street to your side, but I got a kick in the teeth for it."

Ranier's blue eyes probed at Lee for a moment, and the corners of his mouth twitched slightly with his thought. Finally he said, "If you're talking about Miss Harrington's refusing to go to the dance with you, I can tell you now that she already had a previous engagement. Next time ask a little sooner than a week before the dance."

Vic looked at his father, his mouth open with amazement. "You mean Barrett asked Emily to the dance and you didn't tell me?" he demanded. When Noah nodded, Vic turned his enraged face toward Lee.

"You dirty scum," he ground out. "If you ever walk on the same side of the street with Emily I'll—"

"You'll what?" Lee interrupted, his face strangely piercing in its quietness. His lips were pressed tightly together and the color had left them.

From behind the bar, Hugh Dennis said, "Lee, forget it." His words fell on deaf ears. He turned to Noah and his voice was tight with urgency. "Get Vic out of here, Sheriff."

Noah moved one step toward Lee. He said over his shoulder, "Vic, go on back to the office."

Vic shoved past his father, his eyes alight with a wild anger. He didn't bother to answer his father's order, but instead grabbed his pistol from its holster and attempted to drop Lee with a blow of the barrel.

Lee went into action as if a tight-wound spring had suddenly let go inside him. His left arm went up, stopping Vic's blow, and his right fist shot out with the force of a steam piston, catching Vic on the point of the chin with a cracking sound.

The deputy went down heavily to the seat of his pants, still holding the pistol in his hand. For just a moment he sat dazed; then he cried out his rage, bringing the pistol up to fire. Lee kicked out, and the toe of his boot caught Vic's right wrist. The pistol went spinning, sliding across the floor and thudding to the sidewalk under the batwings.

He stepped back and waited. Vic began to rub his wrist with his left hand. Then he got to his feet and began to brush his trousers, his face set in a sullen scowl.

"Get on to the office, Vic," Noah repeated.

Vic moved to the door, then turned back. He said in a loud voice, "I'll get you, Lee Barrett. I'll follow you until I've got something on you, and then I'll send you up for so long you'll forget there ever was a town named Split Rock."

"I won't hold my breath waiting, Deputy," Lee said in disgust.

Noah's face colored at his son's outburst, and for a moment a look of pain crossed his face. Lee saw it and was startled by it. He felt a flash of pity for Noah Ranier, but it soon passed.

Noah nodded and said in a low voice, "So long Lee, Hugh." He turned and walked from the saloon, his back stiff and straight.

Hugh turned to Lee, his eyes flashing. "You didn't have to bait them like that, Lee. They're the law. Haven't you got any brains at all?"

Lee went to the bar and rested his elbows on it, while Hugh Dennis studied him through angry eyes. Hugh was not tall, and he was slight. His face at forty-five was smooth and pale, for he seldom got out into the sunlight.

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"I don't understand you at all, Lee," Hugh complained. "That was a stupid thing to do, to tell them that you suggested the bank robbery. What did you hope to accomplish?"

"Cut out the lecture, Hugh," Lee said shortly. "You and Noah are just alike, always lecturing." He brushed his hand through his rusty hair and smiled. "I did tell Mike Cohane that the bank was easy. I told him how to do it, too, and it worked."

"But why?" Hugh's pale face had taken on a sickly yellowish color at this news. "You wouldn't understand; you're satisfied with this foul-smelling hole. This is your whole life. But I want something more. Understand? Get it through your head that I want something more."

He turned on his heel and walked toward the dim rear of the room. What was the use of talking to Hugh? He'd never understand about the bank, that it was a way of striking back at Split Rock. The town had its money in that bank, the money of the parents of kids that had taunted Lee all his life for being poor and for living in back of a saloon. He remembered himself as a small, freckle-faced red-headed kid running to the only home he knew, the Wyoming Saloon, covered with the blood of his fighting.

He jerked open a soiled door at the back of the room and slammed it again behind him. This was his home, one tiny room on the wrong side of the town. Even here it smelled of whiskey and spit-riddled sawdust.

He pulled open the top drawer of the battered dresser and reached for the cigar box there. It contained all the money he had in the world, fifty dollars. It was money that Hugh had paid him for work around the saloon, for tending bar on the few rush nights, for sweeping out, for repairs.

NOW he stuffed the bills into the pocket of his jeans and shoved the drawer shut again. When he turned around, Hugh was at the door.

"You're leaving, Lee." It wasn't a question, but a statement, and it was filled with sadness.

Lee nodded, then added by way of explanation, "I'm tired of fighting it, Hugh. I'm getting out and staying out. You should have done it, too, a long time ago."

Hugh stepped into the room. "Listen, Lee," he pleaded. "If you have to go, promise me one thing—that you won't go after Mike Cohane."

Lee was gathering his few belongings, throwing them on a blanket in which he intended to roll them up. He stood up straight and looked at Hugh. "I'm going to get mine any way I can Hugh," he said curtly. "When you've got money they don't care how you got it. You're a little tin god."

"That's not true, Lee," Hugh told him, stepping closer. "For some, maybe, but not for you. You're honest and you've got a conscience. You never kept anything from me before this bank job. Your bitterness has twisted your thinking."

It was true, Lee realized. As far back as he could remember he had told Hugh everything that happened, everything he felt, and Hugh had always had time to listen, to help when he could. But Hugh couldn't help any more. A man had to make his own way sometime, had to decide things for himself. There was just one way to get what he wanted, and that was to fight and kick and gouge until he was on the other side of the street.

"It's no use, Hugh," he said shortly. "You've got all you want, but it isn't enough for me."

He rolled up the belongings in the blanket, folding the ends in so that they wouldn't spill out. He tossed it across one shoulder and went to the door that led into the alley.

"So long, Hugh," he said. Then he added quietly, "Thanks—for everything."

He went into the alley and turned to his left. At the first corner he swung toward the main street of Split Rock. When he reached that, he headed toward the livery stable. His horse was stabled there, a horse that Hugh had given him on his twenty-first birthday. He felt a short pang of remorse when he thought of this. Hugh had sacrificed more than once for him.

"Hello, Lee."

It was Emily Harrington, standing in the doorway of her father's store.

She was a tiny thing, and pretty. He touched the brim of his hard felt hat and wondered why she had even bothered to speak to

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him. "Emily," he murmured, and started on past the doorway.

But she spoke again, and he halted. There was a small frown on her face, putting two creases between her dark eyes. She asked, "Are you going somewhere?"

For a moment he didn't answer. Her sudden solicitude for him angered rather than flattered him. It's as if I were some poor stray dog, he thought.

"I'm leaving town," he told her in a clipped voice. He walked on then, hearing her say his name and then lapse into silence when he kept moving.

The horse Hugh had given him wasn't expensive, but it was a strong sorrel gelding with plenty of bottom. Lee paid his bill at the stable and swung into the saddle, anxious to shake the dust of Split Rock from his feet. As he rode out of town he passed the Emporium. Emily was still standing in the doorway.

Take a good look at her, he thought grimly. She's one of the reasons you're leaving.

And he did take a good look, noticing the long, dark hair, the small, round face and, most of all, the dark, luminous eyes. For just a panicky moment he thought he wouldn't leave, couldn't leave, because of her, but the feeling passed and he set his horse into a jog.

He waved a hand toward Hugh's white face, pressed against the window of the Wyoming Saloon, and the saloonkeeper returned the farewell, sadly.

It was a long ride into the mountains from Split Rock. He tried singing to rid himself of the feeling of depression that was upon him. But that didn't help, and he dropped into grim silence.

He was away from the hated town and heading for something better than he had ever known, so he wondered at his own lack of enthusiasm. He kept thinking of Hugh, alone in his old, rotting saloon, and of Emily. The picture of her in that doorway kept coming back into his mind.

"Forget her," he muttered aloud. "She's not for you, not in a thousand years."

It was the second day after that when he dropped into the tiny meadow, deep in the foothills. He came through the pines and saw the rude cabin at the far end. Three horses grazed not far from the cabin, and a wisp of smoke rose from the tin chimney.

This was the place that Mike Cohane had told him about. This was the hideout that he had described, bragging about how it was impossible to find unless you knew the landmarks. Cohane had been right, too, because the posse had passed it by. Barney Powell and Pete Stacy were in the cabin, too, and Lee smiled when he thought of how surprised they would be to see him.

Mike had given him the landmarks that pointed the way to the cabin, hoping that Lee Barrett would come and warn them if things got too hot—hoping too, that Lee would change his mind and join them. Mike Cohane had big plans, and he needed reliable men to carry them out.

The door to the cabin opened and a rifle poked out, then was followed by stocky Pete Stacy. The outlaw squinted across the distance, then said something over his shoulder that Lee couldn't hear.

BARNEY POWELL stepped into sight, and then Mike Cohane, the leader of the crew, pushed them aside and came out. Cohane was a blocky man, taller than Lee, but he didn't appear so because he was much heavier. His teeth gleamed whitely as he grinned up at Lee.

"I was wondering when you'd show up, Barrett," he said, and Lee wondered what had given Cohane the idea that he would show up at all.

Lee said, "I got fed up. That offer to join you still open?"

Cohane's grin widened. "Light down and give that poor nag a rest. There's coffee on the stove."

After he off-saddled the sorrel, Lee went into the messy cabin. It smelled of old meals and stale air, but the coffee was good and, after the first few minutes, Pete and Barney warmed up to his company.

"We got eight thousand dollars," Cohane told him. "How does two thousand apiece sound?"

It was more money than Lee had ever thought about, and Cohane was offering him a full share. There was a warmth in him now,

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possibly caused by the whisky with which he had laced his coffee, but also because of the comradeship. There was no struggle to be accepted with these men. They laughed and crowed in loud voices of the ease with which the Split Rock Bank had been robbed. And Lee came in for his share of praise, too, for he had planned the whole thing for them.

"Barrett, you've got a head for this business," Cohane told him that night after supper. "Pete and Barney and me, well, it's all we can do to count to ten. That scrawny guy that raised you sure saw to it that you had a good education. That's what we need, somebody with brains."

The statement was the highest compliment Cohane had ever paid a man and Lee knew it, but it didn't set well. That "scrawny guy" was Hugh, and Lee knew that he would never be able to repay Hugh for what he had done for him. And he wondered for just a moment what kind of brains he had in his head, to come running after these hard-bitten men. He had felt odd and apart in town, and now he found that he felt the same way here.

But there was the two thousand dollars, a start toward the money he needed to buy respectability. Money would buy anything. It would buy Hugh's freedom from his old saloon, and it would buy Lee's way into the homes hitherto inaccessible.

"You came just in time, Barrett," Cohane told him. "We're pulling out of here tomorrow and going to Cheyenne for a little fun." He grinned knowingly, and the three outlaws laughed.

It was past midnight when Lee spread his bedroll on the floor of the cabin. There were only three bunks and they, of course, were claimed by Mike Cohane and Barney and Pete.

So secure were the outlaws in their hideout that they didn't bother to post a guard outside. Cohane had said, "If they can't find us in the daylight, they sure as hell aren't going to find us in the dark."

But somebody did find them that night. Lee awoke to the sound of a muttered curse from Cohane, and then heard Mike creep past him in his bare feet. When the door opened, Lee saw the reflection of starlight off a rifle barrel. He threw off his blankets and went to the door. Cohane had disappeared into the trees, and Lee could hear nothing but the pounding of his own heart.

Then there was a grunt and the rifle crashed, the muzzle flash coming blue through the darkness. Behind Lee, Barney and Pete Stacy came awake with the noise. They thudded to the flood in their bare feet and rushed to the door of the cabin.

"What's going on?" Pete grunted sleepily.

"Mike's got something on the hoof out there," Lee told him. Sure enough, Mike Cohane came back toward the cabin, dragging a dark object behind him.

"I got me a real varmint," he chortled. He dragged his victim into the room. "Light the lamp, Barney."

Lee gasped when the light flooded the room. Mike's varmint was Vic Ranier.

"You know this one, Barrett," Mike said gleefully. "It's the sheriff's son—a real lawman." He tossed his head back and roared with laughter.

Lee dropped to his knees beside Vic. He felt the deputy's pulse and then said, "He's still alive, Mike."

"Sure he's alive," boomed the outlaw. "I just knocked him out. He'll come out of it before long. But he won't go far; I put one of his legs out of commission."

Lee saw that Cohane had shot Vic in the thigh. The deputy sheriff stirred and groaned, then opened his eyes and looked blankly around him. When his gaze steadied on Lee's face he mumbled, "Barrett, I told you I'd follow you."

Lee remembered the threat in the Wyoming Saloon. At the time he had thought it only the empty words of a hysterical man. He began to tear at Vic's trouser leg in order to get a better look at the wound.

"What are you doing?" Barney asked.

Lee looked up. "What do you think I'm doing? I'm going to bandage the wound, as soon as I see how bad it is."

"Oh, hell," Pete commented in disgust, "tie him up and let's get some sleep."

LEE looked at the men who stood over him. It came to him all at once that they would let Vic Ranier die, or they would kill him. He felt revulsion, but he shrugged

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and picked up the rope that Cohane flung at him from across the room.

"Let's see if he has any money on him," Barney said. He reached into Vic's pocket and drew out his wallet.

With a cry of delight he drew a sheaf of bills from the billfold. He threw it down and held the money up to the light. "We're rich," he crowed, and the rest laughed at the joke.

The billfold dropped open and a rectangle of paper slid out onto the floor. Lee picked it up. It was a picture of Emily Harrington. He studied it and felt suddenly unclean. Barney snatched the picture from his limp fingers, and there was more whooping and hollering.

Lee looked up and saw that Vic was watching him, a paralyzed fear in his eyes. "Aren't you going to tie him up, Barrett?" Cohane asked. "The way you two have been glaring at each other, I reckon you'll do a good job of it."

And Lee tied him up as Vic lay slack and weak, watching him like some captured animal.

How low can a man get? Lee thought later that night. The cabin was dark and silent, except for the breathing of the men. Lee lay looking up at the ceiling. At the Wyoming Saloon he had thought that he was at the bottom of the well, that anything he did would be a step upward. But now he found that he was entering the mud and slime of life, something he had not even been conscious of before.

The faces of the people in his life kept coming to mind, reminding him of what he had left behind. There was Hugh who had raised him, who had loved him like his own son. Yes, and there was Noah Ranier, a just man who had never taken advantage of Lee's low station in the town. Noah had a son he loved, too, and he, Lee, held that son's life in his hands.

Emily Harrington's face came to him the strongest, and he supposed that it was because he had just seen her picture. She represented all the things he wanted in life, and for a moment his old bitterness returned. But she represented decency and a clean life, too. He made up his mind, and kicked the blankets from him suddenly. The door to the room was closed, and it was pitch black inside the cabin. Vic Ranier was close by; Lee could hear the deputy's ragged breathing.

Lee pulled on his boots, his heart pounding loudly in his ears. Cohane would show him no mercy if he caught him running out. He moved silently to Vic's side and touched his arm. Vic turned his head, and Lee saw the glow of his eyes. He began to untie the deputy sheriff.

Vic said nothing. When he was untied they both crawled toward the door, Vic leading, Lee right behind. Vic reached up, and the metal latch rattled—a sound that Lee thought could wake the dead. The door swung open inward, and Vic was nearly in the open when Cohane's voice cut the night like the boom of a cannon.

"Who's there?" he roared.

When he got no answer, he reached over his head for the gun he kept there. Lee saw the movement and brought his pistol up and fired, the blast shattering the silence and the darkness for a moment.

He dove through the open door then, and saw Vic making rapidly for the nearest horse, dragging his bad leg in a hopping walk. Lee started to follow him, but stopped. His job wasn't done yet.

Barney and Pete came boiling out of their bunks. Lee shouted, "Throw your guns out here on the ground. Cohane's dead." He wasn't sure of that last part, but it would serve to halt Pete and Barney.

There was silence from the cabin. Behind him he heard the pound of hoofs as Vic left the meadow on the run, riding bareback. Lee would have liked the deputy's help, but now it was a job he'd have to do alone.

When neither of the men showed at the door, Lee sent a shot straight through the dark opening, and heard the bullet spang against the stove. Barney cried out in pain as the richocheting bullet hit him. A moment later two dark objects thudded on the hard ground. The outlaws came out.

COHANE was dead. Lee's shot had caught him in the chest and he had died immediately. Pete and Barney had no fight left in them, after burying Cohane behind the cabin at daylight.

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It was a solemn procession that rode into Split Rock. Two well-roped outlaws led the parade, followed by a horse carrying saddlebags and an empty saddle. A grim-faced Lee Barrett trailed behind, his face haggard, his rusty hair matted where it flopped below the brim of his hat.

There was no more joy in coming back than there had been in leaving, Lee found. He had stepped in the mud and now he was back where he had left off. But he understood Hugh's feelings a little better now, and his eyes searched the window of the saloon as he passed. Hugh's startled face peered out at him, and Lee tried to force a grin that didn't come off.

It had taken three days to reach Split Rock, for it had been slow going, with the prisoners. Vic Ranier appeared in the doorway of the sheriff's office, hobbling on one crutch. The deputy turned, saying something, then Noah shoved past him, squinting up at the procession.

A crowd had gathered almost before Lee swung wearily from the saddle of his horse. It was a silent bunch that watched this familiar red-headed stranger stride stiffly up to Noah Ranier.

"The money's in the saddlebags on Cohane's horse," Lee said wearily.

Lee carried the saddlebags with the money into the office. Noah followed behind him with the prisoners. When they were safely in their cells, he came into the office again.

"I shot Cohane," Lee told him. "We buried him behind the cabin."

Vic hobbled across the room and faced his father. "He's as guilty as the rest of them," he howled. "He was running out when I caught up with them. You heard him say he planned the whole thing."

Noah brought the palm of his hand across Vic's face in a stinging slap. Vic staggered back and Lee caught him, saving him from falling.

"He saved your fool neck," Noah bellowed, as Vic's hand went to his cheek. "If it hadn't been for Barrett we never would have recovered the money. You had a good amount in that bank, as I recollect. And you ran out on your duty like a scared rabbit."

"Hold on, Sheriff," Lee said. "Vic's right. I was running away with them. I got fed up with this town."

"But you came back."

Lee looked at the floor and said in a low voice, "I stepped in the slime and I didn't like it."

Noah nodded in understanding, then said, "You'd better get some sleep, Lee. You're about done in."

"Aren't you going to lock me up?"

Noah looked at him without the trace of a smile. "What for? You're a hero now. Knowing what I know, I can't quite agree with that. But what the town doesn't know won't hurt them. Get on home. Hugh'll be waiting."

Vic opened his mouth to protest, but subsided again when Noah glared at him. Lee went outside and shoved through the crowd, knowing that the murmured admiration for his feat would turn sour as soon as Vic's mouth got to working.

It really didn't matter any more, though, and he angled across the street toward the Wyoming Saloon. He was brought up short on the other side by Emily Harrington.

She faced him and smiled timidly. "You didn't stay away very long."

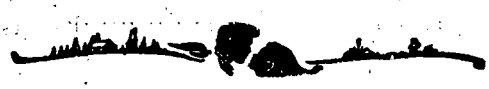
"I—" His voice trailed off. There was nothing to say to her; there would never be anything to say to Emily Harrington.

But she went on talking. "You misunderstood me the other day, Lee," she was saying. "Vic had already asked me to the dance, but I didn't promise him all the dances. I tried to tell you that, but you cut me off. You don't give a person a chance."

He looked down at her, dumfounded, and his face cracked into a smile. Without knowing he did, he straightened the tired slump from his shoulders. "I'm sorry, Emily. I'll be there to claim those dances," he told her vehemently. "Things are going to be different from now on."

He looked past her, his hand going to the brim of his hat. "Excuse me," he said. "I've got to be going home."

He hurried past her. She looked after him and saw a smiling Hugh Dennis, waiting in the doorway of the Wyoming Saloon.



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WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

by Professor MARCUS MARI

WOMAN OF TAURUS
APRIL 21 — MAY 20

ON MAY 10, 1869, a golden spike was driven at Ogden, Utah, marking the junction of the Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroads. Thus was the completion of the first trans-continental railway commemorated.

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She is naturally easygoing, and her generosity is frequently imposed upon, but when she realizes it, she may lose the habit of self-control. It is well to appreciate the fact that the Taurean's anger is usually based on righteous indignation, and seldom explodes without cause.

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Trouble Range

By Gordon C. Baldwin

THE STORY SO FAR: Sheriff SCOTT MORGAN foils a holdup on a stagecoach in which he, Sheriff TOM WARNER'S daughter JANE, and newcomer to town NAN AUSTIN, are riding. Scott wounds one man, BERT, and sees BUCK CLAYTON bossing the holdup. Later Scott finds that Warner and JUDGE HORACE SPELLMAN were murdered, apparently because they knew someone in town was wanted for an out-of-state crime. Respected saloon owner GENE DECKER is trapped into admitting he knows Clayton, and there are indications he is connected with the murders. Clayton tries to bushwhack Scott and is killed. Seeking a live witness against Decker, Scott finds Bert and the man hiding him, OSCAR TRUMBAUGH. But Oscar is shot by Decker's friend DUTCH DORMAN, and later Bert is shot in his cell, before he can talk. Deputy JIM CANNON is knocked out.

PART THREE

TWO weeks passed, and for that period Sentinel enjoyed peace. Scott Morgan and Jim Cannon remained close to the office, while in fourteen days of steady riding Ned Quinn had touched town only three times. Ned had spent fully half his time bellied down on a high knoll overlooking the Rocking R, but had seen nothing unusual.

"It's a beautiful story," Nan said, "but I don't like the ending."

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To Scott it was an uneasy quiet. He had the feeling that trouble was brewing. Yet he had had little time during those two weeks to brood about it. Jane Warner was still in town, and he had spent almost every evening with her.

In addition, he had acquired the habit of dropping into Nan Austin's three or four times a day—for coffee, he kept telling himself, though he was beginning to suspect that it went deeper than that. And, to his disgust, banker Stacey Blackwell had become a regular customer of the Elite.

Jim Cannon did not share Scott's pessimistic beliefs. The lanky deputy had just returned from dinner and found the sheriff staring gloomily out the front window, his hands rammed deep in his pockets. Jim scaled his hat onto a peg and came across to slap his partner on the back.

"What are you scowling about? There's no rustling, no more holdups, no more murders. You couldn't ask for a more peaceful place."

Scott swung away from the window and dropped into his swivel chair. "It's peaceful right now," he admitted grudgingly, "but I don't reckon it'll stay that way long. You can bet Decker has some scheme up his sleeve. And where's Dutch Dorman? We have to keep our eyes open."

"Maybe you're right." Jim slouched in his chair and swatted lazily at a buzzing fly. Suddenly he said, "Say, what's all this talk going around about the commissioners not being satisfied with the way you're running the office, and that you should resign?"

Scott's boots dropped to the floor. "Where'd you hear that?"

"It's all over town. Three or four people asked me about it on the street, and I heard some talk in Nan's place. It's not so, is it?"

Scott sat silent for a minute, frowning down at the desk. "I wonder who started that rumor. It'd be just like Decker to think up a trick like that. No, Jim, I'm not resigning. I saw George Conway just yesterday, and George never said a word about it."

"What're you going to do about all the talk?"

"Nothing, right now. Talk won't hurt us. Let Decker worry about it." He came erect and picked up his Stetson. "I'm going out to eat."

Scott made his way across the street and turned in at the Elite. It was well past noon, and only one customer was in the restaurant, a tall, wiry young man leaning forward on the counter looking up into Nan Austin's smiling face. Scott came to an abrupt halt and clapped a hand to his forehead.

"My own brother," he cried. "Now I know why you've been sneaking to town four times in the last two weeks. But do you ever come to see me? No, not you. I find you in here, every time. How are we going to make any money out of the ranch if you spend all your time hanging around here?"

He grinned at Bob Morgan's smiling face, and caught the twinkle in Nan's gray-green eyes as he sat down beside his brother.

"Believe me, Nan," he went on, "nothing ever took Bob away from the ranch before. He'd become a regular hermit. But now look at him." Scott shook his head slowly. "This is a plain warning to me. Reckon I'll have to watch my step, or I'll be losing my best girl."

Bob's lips twitched, and Nan was suddenly struck by the remarkably close physical resemblance between the two brothers. Bob's eyes were a darker shade of blue, his mouth a trifle wider, but otherwise he was only a slightly older, slightly heavier version of his younger brother. In two short weeks she had become extremely fond of both of them.

"It's your own fault," Bob said. "Every time I've seen you, all you could do was rave about Nan. So I had to see for myself." He slanted a smiling eye at his listeners. "Reckon I must've brought you up right, Scott. You've got good taste. But I'll tell you one thing—she's too good for you, and I'm going to have to take her away from you."

There was a sparkle in Nan's eyes and a faint flush in her cheeks. "Oh, you two," she exclaimed. "Aren't you ever serious when you're together?"

"We're dead serious," they shouted in one voice, and then broke into delighted laughter at the deepening color in the slim girl's face.

Bob stood up and rumpled Scott's hair. "I'll be back for supper, Nan. Take good care of our girl, kid. See you at the office later."

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"If you don't, I'll know right where to look for you."

The door banged behind Bob, and Scott grinned up at the girl. "Now that we've gotten rid of him, how about dinner for a hungry man?"

But the gay mood left him almost at once. He ate his food absently, as absently rolled a cigarette. He stirred sugar into the fresh cup of coffee Nan poured for him. He was frowning, a remote look in his eyes. He spooned more sugar into his coffee, and then was startled by a silvery peal of laughter. He looked up at the girl, puzzled.

She wrinkled her nose at him. "That's the second time in the last five minutes you've put sugar in your coffee," she said.

Scott's grin was rueful. "Reckon this job's getting the best of me, if I can't remember any better than that."

"I've heard some of the talk, Scott, but I don't believe a word of it."

"Thanks, Nan, for sticking up for me," he said, running his fingers through his hair. "But it's true I haven't gotten anyplace. So far I've run into a stone wall." There was a bitter note in his voice.

"Just the same," she told him, temper turning her eyes stormy, "I don't think Gene Decker and Stacey Blackwell should be saying the county needs a more experienced man as sheriff. No one could've done more than you have."

SO IT was Gene Decker spreading the rumor, he thought. He had guessed right, there. But why would Blackwell be doing it also? He couldn't figure that out. He shook his head, and had started to speak, when he saw Nan's eyes lift with sharp interest toward the front window. He turned on the stool and saw a pair of riders approaching.

When they came abreast of the restaurant, Scott saw it was Jane Warner and Gene Decker. Jane was laughing at something Decker was saying, looking up into the saloonman's smiling face. Neither of them noticed their audience inside the window.

Scott sat motionless, watching, until horses and riders were out of sight. His eyes tightened, his lips thinned. Nan was quick to catch the changing expression in his face.

"You don't like Gene Decker, do you?" she asked suddenly.

Scott brought his gaze back to meet Nan's eyes, and after a moment the gravity left his face. "You don't miss much," he said, with a slow grin. "No, we never did particularly care for each other, but it didn't turn to open dislike until the last couple of weeks."

Nan gave a little shiver. "I'll have to confess I don't like him either. He always seems too smooth, too oily."

Scott came to his feet, reaching for his hat. "I reckon I can thank him for one thing, though. He's given me an idea. We're going riding. It's about time you took a few hours off and saw a little of the valley."

Nan's eyes sparkled. "I'd love it. I'll be ready in half an hour."

Thirty minutes later she was waiting when Scott drew up in front. He whistled softly. She was dressed in a divided skirt of green corduroy, with a silk blouse to match. There was a darker green neckerchief about her throat, and her auburn hair was tucked up under a flat-crowned white Stetson. His admiring look brought warm color to her face.

He gave her a hand up, swung up on his own bay, and stirrup to stirrup they rode up the street. Their departure was not unobserved. As they drew even with the barber shop, Bob Morgan hailed them loudly.

"Don't forget what I said. Take good care of our girl."

Nan laughed, and Scott's face grew fiery red. Inside the hotel lobby, Jane Warner also heard Bob's ringing words, and she stepped to the doorway and watched them till they were out of sight. Her hands were tightly clenched, and her eyes were bright, when she finally turned and hurried upstairs to her room.

At a partly opened window in the bank, a third person's gaze followed the riders. When Stacey Blackwell at length swung away, his face was hard, the corners of his mouth white with anger.

The riders crossed Wind River and continued along the yellow ribbon of the stage road, eastward across the valley. There was

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a warm sun in a sky dotted with white clouds. Nan sat like a man in the saddle, her legs straight, her body swaying in easy motion.

"I was beginning to wonder if I'd forgotten how to ride," she said. "This's the first time I've been on a horse since I left Montana."

"You're doing fine. Looks to me as if you were born in a saddle."

After a moment, she said, "Where are we going, Scott? Not that it matters, but don't forget I have to be back before the supper rush."

"I thought we'd ride up to the top of Squaw Peak." He pointed to a high butte rising abruptly from the plain, its conical peak bold against the blue-white background of sky and clouds.

They rode along without words through the afternoon's gathering heat. Scott was strongly aware of her nearness. His hand tightened on the reins, and he dropped his horse back a step so that he could watch her. The wind had whipped bright color into her cheeks, had ruffled the shining hair around her temples. Once she twisted about in the saddle and surprised him looking at her. There was a dancing light in her eyes as she turned back.

They circled the base of Squaw Peak and angled off into twin wagon ruts that vanished into the shadowy mouth of a low-walled canyon lifting up the eastern flank of the butte. Presently they came to a branching in the road. Scott indicated the trail to the left, and almost at once they were threading their way between tall pines, following a dim path running upgrade.

At a narrowing in the trail, Scott dropped back to let the girl take the lead. They reached a broad switchback, and here Scott pulled level with the girl and pointed downslope to where a small meadow opened up. Following his gesture, Nan saw the roof of a log cabin through the trees.

"That's Stacey Blackwell's place," he said.

They traveled single file up the steepening trail, their horses moving at a slow walk and grunting with the climb. After one last scrambling ascent up a steep incline, they rode out on the flat-topped crest of Squaw Peak. Scott led the way to the center, dismounted, and moved over to help Nan. He lifted his arms and, as she slipped to the ground, he took her entire weight for a brief moment. Then he stepped quickly back, his glance falling away from her's.

Somewhat unsteadily, Scott loosened the saddle cinches, saying, "The best view's over here." Nan followed him to the western edge.

She stopped with a gasp. The ground dropped away at their feet, falling abruptly off in a series of broken terraces to the valley floor, well over five hundred feet below. Sweeping in a vast arc to north, west, and south lay the reaches of Rainbow Basin, its green expanse slashed by the silvery thread of Wind River.

On the far side of the water Nan's eye picked up the tiny, irregular dots that were the houses of Sentinel. To the north, massive, slate-colored clouds banked high over the granite peaks of the Turkey Tracks, while to the south the desert stretched away under a shimmering heat haze.

Scott drew a deep breath. This was his country. To him each winding trail, every rocky ridge and grassy slope, each mountain and valley, all held a meaning. He loved this land with a deep feeling that few people knew.

Yet almost instinctively Nan Austin felt it and said, breathlessly, "It is beautiful, Scott. I love it too."

AFTER a moment she added, "You'll have to show me where the Cross T ranch is. I've heard you and Bob talk about it, but I don't even know which direction it is from town."

"You can't see it from here. It's just beyond that green spur running out from the Spring Creeks, north of town." She moved closer to sight along his extended arm. "We'll have to ride out there one of these days."

"I'd love to visit it."

She turned her head toward him, her lips parted, and again he was struck by the things her nearness did to him. He wheeled away, stepped to the northern rim, stared off into the distance. After a minute he realized he was looking directly down on the pine clump where the bodies of Judge Spellman and Tom Warner had been found.

He shook his head, and swung his glance to

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the right, his eye falling almost immediately on the roof of Blackwell's cabin. It came to him that the banker's house was less than a mile from the murder scene. He'd have to ask Blackwell if he'd heard anything that night.

Scott came around and saw Nan sitting down at the base of a small tree. He dropped to the ground near her and, rolling a cigarette, sat idly, smoking, watching her. Slanting sunlight glinted against her hair and highlighted the most expressive eyes he had ever seen. She picked up a handful of sand and let it slide slowly through her fingers.

"Why do they call this Squaw Peak, Scott?"

Scott leaned back, supporting his head with his arm. "It goes back to an old Indian legend," he told her. "This basin used to belong to the Utes before they were put on the reservation. According to the legend, a young boy and girl who were in love often climbed up here to sit and dream of the day when they could marry. Then it came time for the young brave to go across the mountains on his first war party. When he returned he would be a full-fledged warrior, and they could be married."

He broke off to draw a long breath on his cigarette. He looked across at Nan and found her eyes fixed on him, a faint smile on her lips. The girl said nothing, but it was a long moment before he could continue.

"While he was gone," he finally went on, "the maiden spent long hours up here, praying for his safe return. At last the party got back, but her lover had been killed, and the rest had to flee before they could recover his body. The maiden couldn't bear to think of being parted from him, so she put on her wedding finery, stole up here, and threw herself over the edge. Ever since then it's been called Squaw Peak."

"It's a beautiful story, Scott," Nan said softly, "but I don't like the sad ending." She leaned back against the tree, her gaze on him.

Carefully he ground out his cigarette stub. "I reckon that's life. We can't have everything we want."

"What do you want, Scott?"

He didn't answer immediately. She was so close to him that he saw the faint row of freckles dotting her shapely nose, and the soft curve of her lips. His heart began to beat a little faster. Something of that feeling must have been reflected in his face, for suddenly a touch of color flashed across her cheeks, her glance fell, and she began to trace an outline upon the ground with the tip of her finger.

A bright flash of lightning stabbed down, followed by the dull rumble of not too distant thunder. Scott jerked his head around, took one look at the heavy clouds rapidly moving in to blank out the sun, and drew himself up swiftly.

"Reckon we'd better be on our way, if we want to stay dry. That rain won't hold off much longer."

He extended his hand. Her fingers were warm and strong; they had a light pressure as she pulled herself upright. For a moment her shoulder gently touched his chest, but this time it was the girl who released her hand and stepped quickly away. Silently she waited while he tightened the cinches and helped her into the saddle.

They rode back in silence, aware of each other, and it was oddly pleasant to Scott. They came into Sentinel's main street an all too short hour later, with the first scattered drops of rain spattering the dust at their heels. In front of the Elite, Nan slipped to the ground and handed up her horse's reins to Scott. Her head was tilted to one side and there was a warm light in her eyes.

"Thanks for the ride, Scott. I loved every minute of it." She gave him a fleeting smile, then disappeared into the restaurant.

The stage station corral where Scott kept his string of horses was located down the cross street near the edge of the river. He was swinging past the bank when Stacey Blackwell stepped out of the side door and called to him. Scott reined in toward the walk and drew to a halt a few feet short of the stern-faced banker.

Blackwell looked to right and left, then up at the sheriff. "I thought I should let you know," he said, his voice low, "that I'm sending twenty-five thousand dollars out on tomorrow's stage. I no longer have need for the money you brought me several weeks back, and since then I've received additional deposits. I don't like to keep too large an amount, so I'm sending this to Woodburn."

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Scott was silent a long moment, considering this information. "What about a guard?" he asked finally.

"That's what I wanted to see you about. Benton, at the stage station, said he had one guard—Red Harrison, I believe—but I thought you might want to send another, after what happened last time."

Scott eased his weight in the saddle. "Reckon that's right," he said. "Does anyone else know about this?"

The banker seemed to stiffen a little. "No one but Caffrey, my cashier, and Benton. Why?"

"The fewer that know about it, the better chance we'll have to get it through safely. All right, Mr. Blackwell, I'll see what I can do. Thanks for telling me." With a nod, Scott lifted the reins and rode on toward the corral.

WHERE did it happen?"

Ned Quinn touched a match to his cigar and squinted through the smoke at Scott and Jim. "By that rocky knob, east of Decker's," Ned said. "I was just leaving when somebody cut loose from the long ridge to the north."

"Got any idea who it was?" Scott queried.

Ned shook his head. "Whoever it was, he was a damned poor shot. He missed me six times running. I didn't hang around to look. Three-four of Decker's crew came out of the yard. It took me till dark to shake 'em. Then I came in."

Scott deliberated a moment. "Reckon that puts a stop to your lookout. You'd better stick to town, at least until Jim gets back from Mesa." Ned raised an inquiring eyebrow. Scott explained about the gold shipment and added, "I'm sending Jim along as an extra guard."

Ned pulled at his sandy mustache, and shot a grin at Jim. "How come you get all the easy jobs? Here I sit a hard saddle all day and half the night, dodging lead, while all you get to do for the next two days is ride the cushions, watching the scenery go by."

Jim snorted derisively. Then boots rang in the hall, the door burst open, and Bob Morgan came into the room in a rush. The newcomer was breathing heavily, and his normally smiling face was gray with anger. His left eye was blackened and fast swelling shut. He slammed the door and pinned his one good eye on his brother.

"What's all this talk about you?" he demanded.

"What talk is this?"

"They're saying you got in a fight with Trumbaugh and this fellow Bert for no reason, that you killed Oscar and wounded Bert, and then made up a wild tale about being chased by a gang of outlaws."

"Who's telling this story?"

"It's all over the Elkhorn. A couple of Decker's punchers were talking about it at the bar."

"Is that where you got the black eye?"

Bob grinned crookedly. "Yeah. They didn't seem to take to my ideas." He grinned again. "They won't be doing much talking for a spell. And that's not all, Scott. They're also saying you had Bert put out of the way to keep him from spilling the truth. They say Jim shot him and then hit himself over the head with his own gun."

The object of this accusation came hurriedly to his feet. "Hell, they can't say that about me!"

"Sit down, Jim." Scott's face was thoughtful. The others looked at him in silence. "This is some more of Decker's work," he said finally.

"Yeah, but what are you going to do about it?" Bob questioned.

"The only sure way to stop that kind of talk is to catch the real murderers," was Scott's answer. "Since we can't do that right now, I reckon the next best thing is to ask Gene to stop spreading all this talk."

"What?" the other three chorused. Jim shook his head, staring at Scott. "That's not going to do any good. He'll just laugh at you."

Scott stood up and came around to the front of the desk. "Maybe he'll listen to reason," he said, and his two hands lifted slowly and clenched into knotted fists. "Come on, if you want to see some fun."

The Elkhorn was doing a rushing business when Scott stepped through the batwings, his brother and the two deputies close behind. The long bar was lined with customers, and

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most of the card tables were occupied. Scott's glance ran swiftly over the brilliantly lit room, and almost immediately came to rest on Gene Decker, standing at the far end of the bar with his foreman.

As Scott's eye fell on them, Hackett nodded, wheeled, and moved up the room. He was within ten feet of Morgan before he spotted the newcomers. Hackett's eyes narrowed, became sly and jeering.

"Out of the way, tin star," he drawled insolently, and when he passed Scott he swung deliberately toward him. His outthrust elbow caught the sheriff in the side and knocked him off balance.

Scott whirled, stretched out his left arm, caught Hackett's shoulder, and spun him around. Even before the man had fully turned, Scott's hard right fist shot up and connected solidly with the point of Hackett's jaw. Hackett's head jerked as the blow smashed home, and he sagged back against Scott's brother.

Bob looked down at him with distaste. Then he reached out, grabbed Hackett by the shirt collar and the seat of his pants, and with one mighty heave hurled him through the saloon doorway. The batwings parted with a crash. A moment later there came the splintering crack of wood as Hackett's body hit the hitching rack.

The swing doors were still rocking when Scott stepped up to the bar, a scant six feet from Gene Decker, and gravely considered the saloonman. His back was to most of the crowd, but, out of the corner of his eye, he could see all their reflections in the back bar mirror. Nobody moved or spoke. Ned and Jim were arranged, one on either side of the doorway, while Bob was now leaning carelessly against the bar, midway the length of the room.

DECKER met Scott's glance evenly and without a change of expression. "Morgan, don't ever do that again to one of my men."

"Then you'd better ride a tighter rein on them, Gene."

"Don't tell me what I should do."

Scott went on as though he had not heard. "And furthermore, Gene, you've spread a lot of lies about me. I wouldn't do it any more, if I were you. Talk like that is apt to land you in trouble."

"You're not suggesting I had anything to do with that?"

"I'm suggesting nothing. I'm stating facts." Scott's tone was dry. "I've seen some low-down rats, Gene, but never one like you."

This was fighting talk. Behind him, Scott heard the faint squeak of a chair. Surprise held Decker silent for a moment.

"You wouldn't dare say that, Morgan," he said, his nostrils flaring wide with anger, "if you weren't hiding behind that badge."

Slowly Scott reached up, unpinned the star, and laid it on the bar. With the same easy motion he unbuckled his gun belt and placed it alongside his badge. He rubbed his knuckles together, looking at the saloonman.

"I'm not afraid of you or any of your yellow-bellied friends, Gene. I think you're getting a little too big for your britches. Take off your gun and let's see if your fighting is any better than your talking."

His blunt challenge ripped into the silence. Scott saw eagerness ignite a hard shine in Decker's chalky eyes. Decker was a big man physically, with a world of confidence in his ability as a fighter, and he had little doubt about the outcome of this. He peeled off his coat, drew a .45 from its shoulder holster, and tossed it beside Scott's.

Then, with an oath, he threw himself at Scott, both fists swinging. Scott ducked one clubbing fist, and took the other high on his shoulder as he stepped close and hit Decker with a solid right and left to the body. The saloonman gasped, fell forward, and managed to lock his arms about Scott's waist, his lowered head jammed into the sheriff's chest. Decker's weight drove Scott back, and he slammed back against the bar with a jarring thud. Both of them dropped to the floor, Scott underneath.

The fall knocked the breath half out of him and, before he could pull free, Decker had rammed his head hard against his face. Scott took that shock full on his lips. He felt the skin crush in, and his brain reeled. The saloon owner's arms clamped around Scott's

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chest with a relentless pressure, crushing his ribs.

Scott's arms, thus pinned, could reach nothing. He rolled over, trying to break that grip, but Decker held on, tightening his hold until Scott felt a paralyzing numbness spread through him. Breath came painfully out of his tortured lungs.

Again Decker brought his head up, butting it into Scott's chin, cracking Scott's teeth together. Scott could not take much more of this. The room began to grow dim before his eyes, and a touch of panic seized him. Decker's arms kept tightening, burying themselves in Scott's sides.

Finally, desperately, he brought a knee up into the saloonman's stomach, driving the breath out of him. But still Decker hung on. Scott pulled his right knee further back and drove it with savage force into Decker's crotch. Decker cried out with pain and rage. The terrible pressure of his arms loosened and, with one final heave, Scott tore himself free.

He climbed slowly to his feet, his aching lungs fighting for air. His knees were trembling, spots danced before his eyes. The salty taste of blood from his crushed lips was in his mouth. He raised a leaden hand to push a lock of hair out of his eyes. Over his labored breathing, he heard the crowd shift uneasily. Through a haze he saw Gene Decker on his feet and moving in again, and he gave ground, not yet ready to meet that charge.

A man yelled, "You got him now, Gene."

Decker sensed his chance, and rushed forward. Then the mist cleared away from the room and Scott found himself steady again. He met Decker's rush, caught him with one foot raised, off balance, and landed a crushing fist on the side of the saloonman's jaw. Decker went over backward with a shout, skidding across the boards.

Scott was standing back, hands on his hips, when Decker came slowly up off the floor, shaking his head from side to side, breath whistling through his wide-open mouth.

His glance came around to Scott, who said mockingly, "What are you waiting for, Gene? I thought you wanted to fight."

Decker let out an animal-like grunt and charged in, forgetting all caution, his only thought beating that taunting face before him into a pulp. Scott easily sidestepped the big man, and slashed him across the temple. Roaring like a maddened bull, Decker whirled, swinging wildly.

Scott stepped inside the blow, and sank a fist wrist-deep into Decker's belly. He could hear the wind being driven from Decker in a gasp. Before he could recover, Scott's left caught him full on the mouth, splitting his lips and sending a trickle of blood down his chin.

Decker cursed but kept coming, hitting out with both hands. Scott slowly gave ground, letting Decker wear himself out. After a minute the saloonman's onslaught slowed, and Scott stopped retreating. He moved closer, crowding Decker hard, driving him back.

He felt Decker's nose crumple under his fist. He took a couple of hard blows in return, before he hooked a short but vicious left under the saloon owner's heart. Decker loosed a long gasping sigh and doubled over. Scott snapped in a looping right and followed with a hard uppercut to the jaw that sent the big man reeling back against the bar.

He hung there, his jaw sagging, his eyes glassy, propped up only by an elbow hooked over the edge of the mahogany. Blood streamed from his mashed nose and dribbled from a corner of his mouth. His once immaculate white shirt was dusty and torn, red-streaked with blood. He was stunned wide open.

SCOTT stepped back, dropping his hands. He couldn't hit a man who was plainly out on his feet. He had started to turn away when Ned Quinn's high-pitched yell stopped him. He wheeled and saw Decker grab a bottle off the bar and lift it high over his head, a wicked light in his eyes.

A blind fury blazed Scott. He leaped forward, caught the downswinging arm with his left hand, and drove a savage right into the center of Decker's face. The bottle dropped harmlessly from lax fingers, Decker's knees went loose, and he started to slump forward.

But there was no mercy in Scott now. He grabbed Decker by the shirt front, held him

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up against the bar, and exploded a right to the point of the chin. All his long-pent-up hatred of Decker was in that blow. The entire length of his arm tingled with the shock. Behind him, a man cried out involuntarily. Scott stepped back and let the saloonman fall. Decker went down heavily, his skull rapping sharply on the boards. He did not move.

Scott stood over him, his fists bruised and bloody, sucking air into his lungs. Behind him was a stunned and silent crowd. They had just seen Gene Decker, a rough and tough fighter, take a thorough whipping. Walt Berry, Conway's foreman, looked down at Decker.

"He sure got what was coming to him," he said, and that broke the hush.

Several others nodded agreement, but many of those present were Decker's henchmen or owed the saloonman for favors, and there was no friendliness in their glances and muttered comments. Blandly ignoring them, Scott shoved through the circle, reached down to pick up his hat, dusted it, and put it back on his head. He turned toward the bar.

"A clean bar towel, Whitey," he called, "and make damn sure it's clean."

He buckled on his gun belt and pinned his star to his shirt. The damp bar rag eased his bruised face, and he was wiping the blood from his hands when his brother and the two deputies came up beside him.

Bob handed him a glass and said, "You need a drink, kid, after that job."

The raw burn of the whisky steadied him, and he was feeling like himself again by the time they left the bar. Gene Decker still lay without motion, plunged deeply into a drugged sleep. Once outside, Jim began to laugh. The others looked blankly at him.

"What's the matter with you?" grunted Ned.

"We sure gave Decker a lesson, didn't we?" Jim grinned happily.

Ned swore heartily, and shoved his gangling partner off the boardwalk. "What did you do? I thought Scott did all the fighting."

Scott did not join in the accompanying laughter. He felt no pleasure in what he had done. His anger had burned away in the fury of the fight. The beating, he knew, hadn't solved anything. Decker would remain unchanged, would never rest content until he had evened the score one way or another.

Sentinel drowsed in the heat of early afternoon when Scott Morgan left the courthouse and headed across the street toward the Elite. Hearing someone call his name, he glanced around and saw George Conway in the doorway of the Mercantile. He stopped and waited for the rancher to join him. Conway halted in front of Scott, a broad grin on his leathery face.

"You look in pretty fair shape, Scott," he said. "I haven't seen the other party, but from what I hear he's not doing so well. Man, I'd like to've seen that fight. What started it, anyway?"

"It's a long story, George," Scott hesitated, and looked across at the Elkhorn, noting that the tie rail had already been repaired. He thought of telling Conway the story, but decided against it. It was better to wait until he could back his suspicions with solid facts. Therefore all he said was, "I don't like Decker and I don't like the talk he's been spreading."

Conway's face sobbered up. "Decker certainly has a big mouth. I'll have a talk with him." His horny palm rasped across his chin. "How are you coming on the murders? Anything turn up yet?" Scott shook his head, and Conway added, "Well, you're doing as well as anyone could. I'm still backing you all the way."

He clapped Scott on the shoulder, then turned back into the store. Scott was still smiling with pleasure at the gruff rancher's enthusiastic support when he pushed through the doorway of the Elite.

"Scott," a soft voice greeted him, and he saw Jane Warner seated at one of the tables.

Twisting a straight-backed chair around, he sat down facing her. "Now this is a pleasant surprise," he said. "How are you, Jane?"

"I'm fine, but what about you?" She gave him an anxious look. "I heard about your fight last night with Gene Decker. Why did you do it, Scott? You'll make him your enemy."

Scott's mouth tightened. "He's already been my enemy for some time."

"How do you mean?"

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"The man's ambitious, Jane. He's greedy for money and power, and he doesn't care how he gets them. I've had to block him once or twice, and I'm in his way. That's all there is to it."

"I don't believe it," she protested indignantly. "Gene isn't like that at all."

"I think I know him better than you do, Jane," he told her gently.

THE young girl tossed her head. "When is all this senseless fighting and killing going to stop?"

"What would you have me do? I've got to uphold the law, and that means running down the murderers of your father and the judge."

"More bloodshed won't bring my father back." She studied his face. "You've changed, Scott. You're harder, more ruthless than you used to be."

"We all change, Jane. I reckon I'm finally growing up."

Both of them looked up as Nan Austin came in from the kitchen. Her cheeks were flushed from the heat of the stove, and her color heightened when she caught sight of Scott.

"Scott! I didn't hear you come in."

As she uttered his name, a warm look appeared in her eyes. Jane, watching her, did not miss it, nor did she miss the sudden light that leaped to Scott's face. Her breath caught, and she bit her lower lip. Then she rose to her feet and picked up her hat.

"I must be going. I've a million things to do. Good-by, Scott." With a cool, distant nod to Nan, Jane went out the door.

Behind her she left two people silently looking at each other. The awareness of each other held them still, and it was a long minute before Scott said, "Beats me how you stay so cool looking. And you're prettier than ever."

His steady gaze deepened the flush on Nan's smooth cheeks, and it was still there twenty minutes later when she sat down across from him. Her eyes followed his nimble fingers as they built a cigarette. Scott leaned back, his long legs thrust out beneath the table.

Looking at the girl, he found himself contrasting her with Jane Warner. Jane was small and laughter-loving, gay and colorful. She wanted men, all men, to like her. Nan was quieter, a taller, slimmer girl and outwardly a calmer one. Yet there was a depth to her, an inner warmth, that others seldom saw.

In her presence he felt relaxed and completely at ease, something he never felt when he was with Jane. Presently Scott glanced at the clock in back of the counter, and stood up.

"Time to go," he said, "if I want to get anything done today."

Nan nodded. "Where's Jim! I haven't seen him since morning."

"He went to Mesa on the stage. I had to send him to help guard twenty-five thousand dollars Blackwell was shipping out."

"Scott! I didn't know."

He grinned down at the girl. "No one was supposed to."

"I hope nothing happens this time."

"So do I, but I reckon we won't know until tomorrow."

He broke off abruptly, his head cocked toward the front, listening. A wagon rattled over the planks of the bridge, swung into the head of the street, and drew to a creaking halt. A man yelled something loudly. Then came the quick pound of boots and the lifting of exciting voices. Scott wheeled, suddenly apprehensive.

"Sounds like trouble," he said, and with a short nod he was gone.

Men were running up the street when Scott hit the boardwalk. Looking that way, he saw a light spring wagon drawn up before Doolittle's. Two men were lifting a blanket-wrapped shape from its flat bed. Scott broke into a run, his feeling of alarm strengthening.

When Ned Quinn came hurrying out of the blacksmith shop, Scott shouted across to him, "Something's wrong, Ned. Saddle up and meet me at Doc's."

He shoved through the crowd before Doolittle's, hearing snatches of conversation. "Red downed—shot in the side—twenty-five thouand, he said—"

Dr. Doolittle was there, with Ernie Stevens, the hostler from the Badger Creek stage sta-

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tion. The doctor was bending over a figure stretched out full-length on the couch. Scott moved closer, and went cold when he saw that it was Jim Cannon, his eyes closed, his face chalky white, a dark stain on his shirt.

Scott stepped over beside Stevens and asked softly, "What happened, Ernie? Did you bring him in?"

"Yeah. The stage was held up beyond Badger Creek," explained the hostler. "They got Red, creased Mac, and put a slug in Jim. After they left with the strong box, Mac came to and saw that Jim was still breathing, so he turned back to Badger Creek. I brought him here fast as I could."

"What about the stage?"

Ernie grinned. "Mac said he hadn't missed making a run in ten years, and he wasn't going to let a little scratch stop him now."

Doolittle finished bandaging Jim. Scott asked, "What about it, Doc? Will he pull through?"

"Hell, yes," Doolittle growled. "But he'll be laid up for a week or so." He looked quizzically up at the sheriff's anxious face. "I expect you'd like to ask him a few questions?"

Scott nodded. "What're the chances of it?"

"Well, don't talk too long. He's lost considerable blood and needs plenty of rest. Hand me that pint of whisky on the table."

He put an arm under Jim's head and poured a few drops of the liquor into his mouth. Jim chocked and let out a groan, and his eyes fluttered open. He gave Scott a faint grin.

"I couldn't stop 'em, Scott."

"Take it easy, Jim," Scott said quickly, bending down. "Just tell us what happened. Where was it, and how many were there?"

Barely moving his lips, Jim said brokenly, "They caught us at the top of the long grade —four of 'em. I only got off one shot before they plugged me. I think I winged one." The effort left him weak and gasping for breath.

Scott bent closer. "Can you remember anything about them?"

Jim tried to shake his head. "They were all masked. The only one I saw close was a big fellow with hairy hands." His voice trailed off, and he slumped back.

Doolittle pulled Scott away. "That'd better be all for now, Scott."

"Thanks, Doc. Take good care of him."

HORSES clattered up outside, and Scott turned toward the door. He nodded to two or three people who spoke to him, yet he scarcely heard them. He was going down the steps when a hand on his arm checked him. He looked down at Nan Austin. The girl's eyes were wide, her face grave.

"How badly is he hurt, Scott?"

"Bad enough, but Doc says he'll be all right." He felt her fingers tighten on his arm.

"Scott, take care of yourself. Come back."

A soft loveliness glowed in her face, and there was a deep warmth in her eyes. For a moment he was still, stirred by her. He drew a deep breath and his voice was oddly gentle.

"Don't worry. I'll be back."

He swung toward the street, where Ned Quinn was waiting with the horses. But once again he was stopped, this time by George Conway.

"I heard about Jim," he said. "It's tough, Scott. Do you need any help?"

Scott shook his head. "There were only four of them, Jim said, and one's probably wounded. Ned and I can track them easier than a posse could. Thanks just the same, George."

Nan Austin watched him ride off beside Ned Quinn, his shoulders angular against the mid-afternoon sun, his long frame swaying easily in the saddle. He wasn't, she thought, a particularly good-looking man, he wasn't spectacular, yet she had to admit that she was strongly attracted to him.

Already, in three short weeks, he had become a part of her and of her life. Deep within her there stirred an emotion like nothing she had ever before experienced. Suddenly, instinctively, she knew that she loved Scott Morgan, and a warm feeling rushed through her at the thought.

At the corner, Scott looked back at Nan. He lifted a hand and she waved in answer. His glance ran on along the street and discovered Gene Decker in front of the Elkhorn. Even at that distance the saloon owner's hatred reached out at him. Beyond him, on

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the steps of the bank, his eye picked up the tall figure of Stacey Blackwell, gazing up toward Doolittle's. Scott's mouth curved cynically. Someone else would have the unpleasant task of informing Blackwell about the loss of his money.

Scott and Ned were rounding the base of Squaw Peak when they heard a horse coming up fast behind them. Scott twisted around, his eyes squinting through the lifting dust.

"Someone's sure hurrying this way," said Ned.

"Yeah." Then, as a horse and rider topped a low rise a hundred yards back, Scott added, "It looks like Bob's gray."

It was. They pulled up and waited. Bob came on and then stopped, grinning at them. Scott glared at his brother.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Thought you might need some help," Bob said complacently. "Besides, a certain young lady asked me to look after you."

"Nan?" At his brother's nod, Scott shrugged. "Well, all right," he said; then added, with a grin, "Reckon we can use you as a cook. I never did like the kind of grub Ned slings together."

Neatly dodging the deputy's downswinging hat, Scott wheeled his horse and led the way up the road. Two hours later they drew rein on the crest of the long grade out of Rainbow Basin, where deep wheel marks at the edge of the road marked the site of the stage holdup. Dismounting well to the side, Scott and Bob squatted on their heels in the shade of a juniper and rolled cigarettes, while Ned began a careful study of the ground. Sign was extremely clear, and Ned was soon able to reconstruct the picture.

"There were four of 'em, all right," he reported. "The two on horses blocked the road up ahead between the cedars, and took care of Mac and Red. The other two were on either side of the stage, and one got Jim."

Scott stood up, his face grim. "Anything else, Ned?"

"Yeah." Ned pointed to a trail of dark spots in the dust. "Jim was right; he nicked one of them. Also, one of their horses has a toed-in left front shoe, which'll make it easier to track."

"Which way'd they go?"

Ned's arm raised. "Straight north."

Scott ground his cigarette under his heel. "Let's go, then."

Less than a hundred yards from the road they found the treasure chest. The lock had been shot off the iron-bound box, and it was empty.

The trail led directly north along the ridge. The fugitives had made no pretense of covering their tracks, and the riders made good time. Yet within a mile Scott called out, "Hold up," and reined in, frowning.

This way would eventually lead either back to the west into the upper end of the basin, into settled country, or on into the rugged heights of the Turkey Tracks, where there were no trails and no habitations. Neither of these was a way for wanted men to take, and he was guessing that their quarry would shortly circle back to the south, heading for Stagecoach Pass, or further to the south into lower country.

He communicated this belief to his companions, adding, "They've got a good five hours start on us. With luck, I figure we can swing straight east and cut their trail, and gain an hour or two."

Ned squinted up at the sun, now low in the west. "Good idea. We have no more'n another two-three hours of daylight left."

TOUCHING his bay with a spur, Scott led the way down the slope, and not many minutes later they dropped into the stage road. Here they watched both sides of the road, keeping alert for any betraying tracks crossing over. At Twin Springs they stopped only long enough to water their horses. Neither of the two hostlers sent to replace Trumbaugh and the still missing El Sanderson had seen anything of the holdup men, and they continued on.

Four miles from Twin Springs they still hadn't encountered any sign. Scott was beginning to believe his hunch had been wrong. Then they clattered across a rocky ledge at the mouth of a narrow canyon coming down from the north, and Ned let out a quick exclamation, and pulled up.

"Wait a minute, Scott. This could mean

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something." He indicated an irregular dark stain on the rock. "Looks like blood."

Reining his horse off to the south, Ned bent low in the saddle to study the ground. Fifty feet further on, the shelving rack gave way to sand. He stopped and waved the others up. There were the marks of four horses gouging the soft earth. Ned pointed to one of the hoofprints.

"It's them. There's our friend with the toed-in shoe."

"How long ago?"

Ned stared down. "Three-four hours, maybe. We're gaining on them."

For a mile or two the trail was plain and relatively easy to follow, and then the country grew rough, broken, and tracking became more difficult. Time after time they lost the trail completely, only to pick it up again by patient circling.

Scott drew his horse in on the edge of a bench and straightened in the saddle. "It's no use, boys," he said. "We'll have to give up for tonight."

Bob's gaze swept the horizon. "If I remember right, this is Skeleton Mesa, and there's a spring below the rim there."

Scott nodded. "Willow Springs. Let's go. Ned and I are ready to sink our teeth into some of your cooking."

Five minutes later the pungent fragrance of burning pinyon wood permeated the air, and Ned was unrolling the supplies from his slicker. They ate rapidly, cleaned the utensils, smoked a final cigarette, and almost immediately rolled up in their blankets.

Lying full length, head propped against his saddle, Scott watched the red coals fade, his mind busy. From Jim's description, one of the holdup gang couldn't be anybody but Dutch Dorman—which would tie Decker in with it. Yet suspicion was not proof.

And then another thought occurred to him. The only two times the stage had been held up had come when it was carrying a treasure chest. Although Clayton could have overheard Woodburn talking about the first shipment, still it began to appear that someone had known about the plans in advance.

[*Turn page*]

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Besides Blackwell, the only others who knew of this last shipment were the cashier, Caffrey, and Benton, the station agent. One of them might have gotten word to Decker, yet Scott instantly dropped the idea. He knew them both too well. Stacey Blackwell, of course, was a logical suspect, but Blackwell wouldn't be likely to steal his own money. In addition, hadn't the banker asked for an extra guard? Scott shook his head.

Thinking of the banker brought Nan Austin to mind. Blackwell was a frequent visitor to the Elite, and Scott was certain the banker's interest was not in food. What was the matter with himself, Scott thought? Couldn't he even keep one girl? Jane Warner was spending more and more time with Gene Decker, and now Blackwell was apparently after Nan Austin.

He wondered what Nan thought of the banker. Blackwell was much older than she, but he was distinguished looking and rich, Scott had to admit. The banker was decidedly a much better catch than a sheriff, Scott had to admit. Gloomily he shook his head again, rolled over, and fell asleep.

The first flush of sunrise found them in the saddle, and by the time the sun had cleared the horizon, they were a long mile down the trail. The tracks led them southward, deeper and deeper into the twisted and broken country fringing the lower desert. Here, despite their most patient efforts, they finally lost the trail.

Scott drew rein and gazed out over the expanse. "Looks like they gave us the slip. Not much chance of finding them down there."

Both Ned and Bob shook their heads, and the latter glumly added, "That's a hell of a lot of country."

It *was* a lot of country, falling away in rocky ridges and sandy draws to the rolling desert hundreds of feet below, bleak and forbidding in the harsh glare of mid-morning sunlight. The only living thing in sight was a buzzard wheeling in wide, slow circles high overhead.

"Reckon we might as well head for town."

Slowly, reluctantly, they swung back. The trail had brought them far to the south and east, and they cut off through the hills, heading directly toward Sentinel. Fifteen miles on they pulled up to breathe their horses on the high bank of a dry stream bed, on the opposite side of which stretched the lower benchlands of Gene Decker's Rocking R.

Ned grinned. "Decker's not going to like us riding across his range."

"The hell with him," grunted Bob, wiping a shirt sleeve over his sweat-streaked face.

They slid their horses down the bank and started across the wash, only to stop dead at the edge of a patch of sand, still damp from the last rain. There before them were the hoof marks of the four horses whose trail they had earlier lost. The tracks looked fresh, and even as they stared at them a rim of dirt broke loose and dropped into the prints.

"These are no more'n an hour old," Ned said.

SCOTT nodded. They had been lucky, damned lucky. Dutch and his three companions had laid a plain trail, swinging first north and then far to the south, to mislead any pursuers. Then they had carefully hidden their tracks, doubled back, and riden into Rocking R from the south. It had been well planned, had come mightly close to being successful.

"Looks like they're heading for Decker's," said Bob.

"We'll soon find out. Let's go after them, boys."

Their weariness forgotten, they scrambled up the steep bank and followed the now clearly marked trail northward. They were now on Decker's range and they rode cautiously, their eyes alert. An hour later they halted on a low hogback and, from a screening cedar clump, looked down on the scatter of sheds and corrals, log bunkhouse and cookshack, and big barn, flanking the one-story frame house marking Rocking R headquarters.

From the front of the house the yard sloped down to the willow-edged bank of Nine-Mile Creek, two hundred feet distant. Scott's glance lifted beyond the stream, following the white streak of the road, and suddenly narrowed at seeing a swiftly-moving cloud of dust a long five miles away and heading toward town.

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He pulled his attention back to the ranch and saw a man step to the bunkhouse door and glance idly out toward the cookshack. After a moment the man turned back.

Bob stirred impatiently in the saddle. "What's the next move, Scott?"

"You stay here, Bob. Watch the back. Ned, you ride down below the bunkhouse, where you can keep an eye on the side and front. I'll circle around and come in on the road."

Bob said, "Are you crazy? They'll shoot you down as soon's they spot you."

"That's a risk I've got to take." Scott raised a hand to his star. "That's one of the handicaps of wearing this. They have to have the chance of giving up peacefully. But don't worry. You two'll be covering me, and I'll send them a hail from the far side of the stream. Come on, Ned. I'll give you ten minutes to get set before I move in."

He reined his horse around and was gone before either could argue. Yet, as Scott worked his way behind a fringe of pines, he felt in his heart that Bob was probably right. Talking to Dutch Dorman and the other outlaws, trying to get them to give up without a fight, would get him nowhere. But he had to attempt it.

Directly in front of the house and a good two hundred yards distant he nudged the bay into the road, holding him to a slow walk. The thud of his horse's hoofs was lost in the powdery dust, and he was within fifty feet of the ford when a horse whinnied shrilly from the corral, and Scott's bay threw up its head and answered.

At the sound a man came hurriedly out of the house, a rifle slack in his arms. It was Dutch Dorman. He stared fixedly at the oncoming rider.

Then recognition blazed in his eyes and he bellowed savagely, "Morgan!" The rifle leaped to his shoulder.

Scott whirled his horse, digging in his spurs. Out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed a second man crowding into the doorway behind Dorman. Dutch's rifle cracked flatly, and a bullet struck Scott's saddlehorn and

[*Turn page*]

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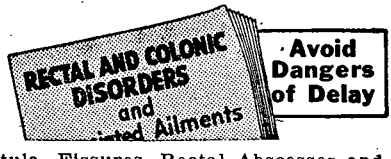

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glanced screamingly off. Then Scott had reached the sheltering trees. Loosening his feet from the stirrups, he slid to earth, jerking the Winchester from its scabbard. As he went out of the saddle he gave the bay a slap that sent the horse racing on up the slope out of danger.

Crack! A rifle spoke from the right, and Ned Quinn's bullet crashed into the wood beside the doorway. With a startled oath, Dutch and his companion sprang back inside and the door slammed shut. The man in the bunkhouse yelled, and all at once the yard was full of firing.

Scott slipped through the willows, waded the knee-deep stream, and eased up the bank. He gained the crest, and flattened out, a dead log and the low-growing sagebrush hiding him from the house. After that first brief flurry of shots, silence had settled over the Rocking R. Scott cupped a hand to his mouth and sent a call echoing across the yard.

"Hey, Dutch—Dutch Dorman! Can you hear me?"

For ten long seconds there was no answer. Then Dutch's voice rang out. "Yeah, we can hear you. What do you want?"

"This is Scott Morgan, Dutch. We've got you covered. Better give up."

"You have nothing on us, Morgan."

"I want you for holding up the stage yesterday, Dutch. We've got the goods on you. You can make it easy or as hard on yourselves as you want. Better give up peacefully. You have five minutes to make up your mind."

"We don't need any time. Try and get us out of here."

Scarcely was the last word out when a rifle barrel leveled across a window sill and cracked viciously. Lead slammed solidly into the log in front of Scott. He hugged the ground as a hail of bullets ripped through the leaves. Calmly he waited until the firing slackened.

Then, rifle cuddled against his cheek, he drew a bead on the lower corner of the window and fired. He heard a man yell. Digging his elbows into the dirt, Scott went to work on the front of the house. Glass fell out of the windows with a jangling crash. He finished the windows.

He slid fresh shells into the rifle, listening to Ned laying his shots on the bunkhouse. From the rear two guns spoke, one the heavy pound of a .45, the second the sharper report of a Winchester. From the crest of the hogback, Bob Morgan's derisive voice floated down.

"That was just a warning, stranger."

Scott grinned. They had them boxed, but he knew that all of Decker's men weren't here. From the evidence, there were only four men on the place, two in the main house, one in the bunkhouse, and the cook. Three men, actually, he thought with another grin, for at the first shot the cook had slammed his door, crying, "I'm out of it! I'm out of it!"

If any of Decker's men who were riding the range were close enough, this firing would draw them like flies. Which meant he and Ned and Bob had to smoke Dutch out as soon as possible.

UNCONSCIOUSLY he had eased up on one elbow. A rifle blasted, and flying lead clipped the top of Scott's right ear. He swore heartily, lined his rifle on the house, and placed half a dozen quick shots through the windows. For a long half minute the yard rang with the din of gunfire. It had begun to die when Scott heard Ned Quinn's voice lift in a triumphant yell.

It sounds like Ned got one, he thought. It was time to start moving in on them then. He threw a last couple of shots at the house, pulled back down the bank, and waded the stream. He broke through the willows, whistled up his horse. Jamming the Winchester into its boot, he swung up, and a few minutes later reined in below the rock outcrop sheltering his brother.

He looked up at Bob and grinned. Bob stretched and started an answering grin. Then a bullet slapped into the rock and sprayed him with flying chips. Bob spat out rock dust and cursed heatedly. Blood was running down his face from a shallow furrow in his brow.

"What're you up to now, kid?"

Scott stepped down from the saddle, pulled his Winchester free, and came up beside his brother. "We've got to root them out damn

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quick," he said, "or we'll have Decker's crew on our necks. I'm going to sneak up from the back and see if I can get inside."

Bob swore. "You'll get yourself killed."

"You got any other plan?" Bob shook his head, and Scott handed him his rifle, saying, "Just keep them busy ducking lead."

With a wave of his hand, he slid out of sight around the corner. Taking advantage of every bit of cover, he made his slow and cautious way forward. At first it was not difficult for him to keep hidden, but soon the slope flattened out, the bushes thinned, and there were sizeable gaps to cross.

Bob, however, had been keeping an eye on his brother's progress, and now he cut loose. Bullets peppered the back of the house, and under the covering fire Scott moved swiftly forward, dodging from one bush to another. He reached the last bush and dropped flat, scanning the fifty feet of open space still separating him from the house. Quiet fell while Bob reloaded.

Coolly Scott surveyed his chances. There was a door in the center of this side of the house, flanked on either side by a window. Even as Scott studied it, a rifle barrel poked over the window sill to the right of the door and a bullet whistled high overhead toward the ridge. Then lead thudded into the house, and the rifle was hastily withdrawn.

Bob fired as fast as he could work the lever, masking his brother's movements. Scott came to his feet and, keeping low, made the fifty feet in a noiseless rush that carried him flat against the boards. He hugged the wall, breathing hard, his sweaty hand tight about the butt of his gun.

It was time to think about getting inside. The door into the kitchen was probably barred, he thought, and he didn't want to go there anyway, because that rifle barrel meant that at least one of the outlaws was holed up in there. The other window beside which he crouched led, he remembered, into a bedroom, and promised the best chance of entrance.

He edged up to the window and peered over the sill. The glass had long since been

[*Turn page*]

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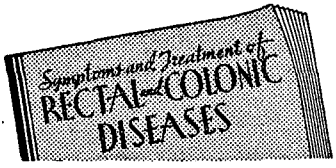

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knocked out by rifle fire, and he had a clear view. The room was empty. From his position Scott could look through an open doorway into a short hallway leading toward the front. A second door to the right led into the kitchen. But of the two men he could see nothing.

Throwing a leg over the sill, he slid noiselessly into the room. As his boots hit the floor, Bob let go a string of shots at the other window, and Scott caught a muffled curse from the adjoining room. That placed one of them, but where was the second man? He shifted his feet, and a boot came down on a sliver of glass. The glass shattered with a sharp crack. Swearing at his clumsiness, Scott held his breath, sweat beading his forehead. There was a short silence. Then a harsh voice lifted from the front.

"What was that, Luke?"

There was no doubt about that voice. A second voice in the kitchen muttered an unintelligible reply, and a foot scraped along the boards. Almost before Scott could thumb back the hammer of the Colt, a slab-sided individual, a bloody rag wrapped about the top of his head, appeared in the doorway. He saw Scott and hauled up short, his beady eyes widening. The Winchester in his arms came up, and snarled wickedly.

Scott felt the tug of the heavy bullet through his shirt, and let the hammer roll beneath his thumb. He saw his lead take the lanky figure in the chest, heard his choked grunt. Luke's body was still going down when Scott moved swiftly, silently, along the narrow hallway leading toward the front of the house. Dutch's hail came again.

"Luke—Luke! What's wrong?"

DUTCH would be facing the kitchen, Scott thought, his right side toward the hall door. This was the chance Scott gambled on as he stepped through his gun waist high. The front room lay before him. Dutch Dorman was standing beside a far window, facing the back. He had leaned his rifle against the wall and was just lifting his sixgun from its holster.

"Hold it, Dutch!" Scott called sharply, his gun leveling on the big man.

Dutch wheeled, his long jaw sagging. He gaped incredulously at the tall figure of the sheriff. Then a startled oath burst from his thick lips.

He yelled, "Morgan!" and brought up his gun.

He shot hastily, wildly. Lead splintered the door jamb beside Scott. Scott let the hammer drop. Smoke mushroomed up between them. A puff of dust jumped from the front of Dutch's shirt, and the big man staggered. Scott started to bring his Colt in line once more, but one look through the drifting powder smoke told him he would not have to fire again. Dutch buckled at the knees and toppled forward to the floor. Scott watched Dutch's body heave convulsively and then go limp, and he knew the man was dead.

Scott eased down the hammer and reloaded automatically. There was the sound of hoofs pounding across the yard. Scott stepped to the door and unbarred it. Ned burst into the room, his ruddy cheeks tight with strain. Scant seconds later, shouting wildly, Bob rounded the corner and skidded to a stop beside them. At the sight of Dutch his breath ran out in a long whistle. He raised his eyes to his brother and cleared his throat gruffly.

"What happened to the other jigger?"

"Dead." Slowly Scott shaped up a cigarette. He dragged smoke deep, said, "Well, let's have a look around. Bob, you root out the cook and hitch up a wagon to haul the bodies back. And rustle it up. We don't want to hang around, or we might have company."

Swiftly Scott and Ned searched the house, but they found nothing. Yet Scott was not particularly disappointed. He hadn't expected Decker to be so careless as to leave any evidence scattered about that would link him up with the stage holdup or with his other activities. And that dust cloud heading toward Sentinel undoubtedly represented where the twenty-five thousand had gone. Still, Scott had enough evidence now to swear out a warrant for Decker's arrest for complicity in the stage holdup. That would give him a chance to search Decker's office safe.

They stepped into the front yard, where Bob and the Rocking R cook, a slovenly-

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looking individual with a straggling, tobacco-stained mustache, were just loading the last canvas-wrapped body onto the wagon bed.

Bob straightened. "Say, there were two of 'em in the bunkhouse. One was a stranger, but the other was Al Sanderson. It looked like Al had been dead for some time. You reckon he's the holdup man Jim wounded?"

"Sounds like it." Scott eyes settled on the cook. "What about it, cookie? What happened here today?"

The cook was sullen, but frankly scared. "I don't know much about it," he mumbled. "Dutch and the other three rode in just before noon. Two of 'em were holding Al in the saddle. The boss and Hackett were here, and they took Al into the bunkhouse."

"When did Decker and Hackett leave?" prodded Scott.

The cook shook his head. "I don't know. I didn't see anything else."

Scott's gaze came back to his companions. "Ned," he said, "you and our friend here bring the wagon in. We'll ride on ahead. See you in town."

(To Be Concluded in the Next Issue)

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 83)

1. Dallas.
2. For grinding coffee.
3. Waitresses and other female employees of the Fred Harvey eating houses along the Santa Fe Railway became generally known as "The Harvey Girls."
4. No. There are also red Angus cattle.
5. Because of the pattern on their breasts.
6. Poncho, pronounced PONE-cho.
7. Cowboys riding at the flank of a trail herd, between the point and the swing, were called flankers. Cowboy throwing down calves by hand for branding are also called flankers.
8. New Mexico.
9. Vera Cruz (VAY-rah Crooce) is on the Gulf Coast of southeastern Mexico.
10. That he took him on for a fight.

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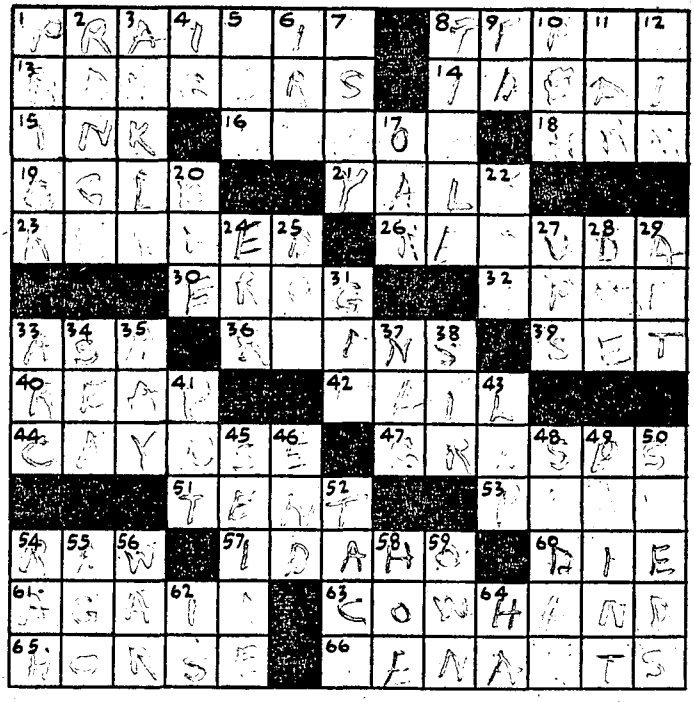
THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1 Western treeless land
8 Indian's tent
13 Texas mounted police
14 Perfect
15 Writing fluid
16 Train station
18 Upper limb
19 To make eyes at
21 New England university
23 Staggered
26 Group of saddle horses
30 Small, leaping animal
32 Cowboy's boot attachment
33 Cigar remains
36 Bridle straps
39 Collection
40 To harvest
42 Tack or brad
44 Indian pony
47 Clutches
51 Camper's home
53 To ring, as bells
54 Uncooked
57 Western state
60 To cease living
61 Once more
63 Ranch worker
65 Palomino
66 Building occupants

A	B	L	E		L	A	G		M	E	S	A
P	R	A	Y		A	T	E		A	V	I	D
P	O	S	E		S	O	M	B	R	E	R	O
L	O	T		A	S	P		O	E	R		
E	M		P	R	O		L	O	S		B	E
	T	R	O	T		B	E	T		F	U	N
S	A	I	D		D	I	D		L	A	N	D
H	I	D		B	A	G		C	O	R	K	
E	L		H	A	Y		H	O	W		H	E
		D	O	N		V	O	W		L	O	N
W	R	A	N	G	L	E	R		B	O	U	T
H	E	R	D		I	T	S		A	P	S	E
O	L	E	O		T	O	E		D	E	E	R

Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

DOWN

1 Previous
2 Cattle land
3 Foot-leg joint
4 Inner Guard (abbr.)
5 Stop-light color
6 Anger
7 To catch sight of
8 Name
9 Edwin's nickname
10 Pod vegetable
11 Hearing organ
12 Shade tree
17 Rowing implement
20 Sprite
22 The letter M (pl.)
24 To make mistakes
25 Female deer
27 —— and downs
28 Owing
29 Skill
31 Alcoholic drink
33 Curved line
34 Ocean
35 It's for horses
37 Old horse
38 Knight's title
41 To place
43 To lick up
45 Fishing net
46 To finish
48 Closed car
49 Calico horse
50 Snow vehicles
52 Diplomacy
54 College cheer
55 Past
56 Fight between nations
58 Garden tool
59 To possess
62 Exists
64 Laughter sound

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When the other kids ask...

WHAT DOES YOUR DAD DO?

How does your boy answer them?

Sure... you're his hero. You *know* that. But sometimes it can get kinda tough if the other kids don't seem to understand about the "old man."

It's not that you *like* to be chained to the same old job. Maybe you just *had* to leave school too soon. Maybe the war interfered. Anyway, here you are, stuck because you just don't have enough formal training.

Well, Mister, You Can Still Make the Grade!

It isn't easy. You've got to have grit and determination and the will to succeed. As long as you have these, I.C.S. can put you on the road to real prestige, advancement and security. Your family can really be proud of you!

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BOOK No. 3 — A sample I.C.S. (math) lesson text that shows you the I.C.S. clear, step-by-step teaching method. Send the coupon today—no obligation!

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Without cost or obligation, send me "HOW to SUCCEED" and the opportunity booklet about the field BEFORE which I have marked X (plus sample lesson):

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- ☐ Air Conditioning—Refrig.
- ☐ Architecture
- ☐ Architectural I.C.

AVIATION
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineering Jr.
- ☐ Aircraft & Engine Mechanic

BUSINESS

CIVIL, STRUCTURAL ENGINEERING
- ☐ Civil Engineering
- ☐ Construction Engineering
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Reading Struct. Blueprints

LEADERSHIP
- ☐ Foremanship
- ☐ Industrial Supervision
- ☐ Leadership and Organization
- ☐ Personnel-Labor Relations

MECHANICAL

RAILROAD
- ☐ Air Brakes ☐ Car Inspector
- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Section Foreman

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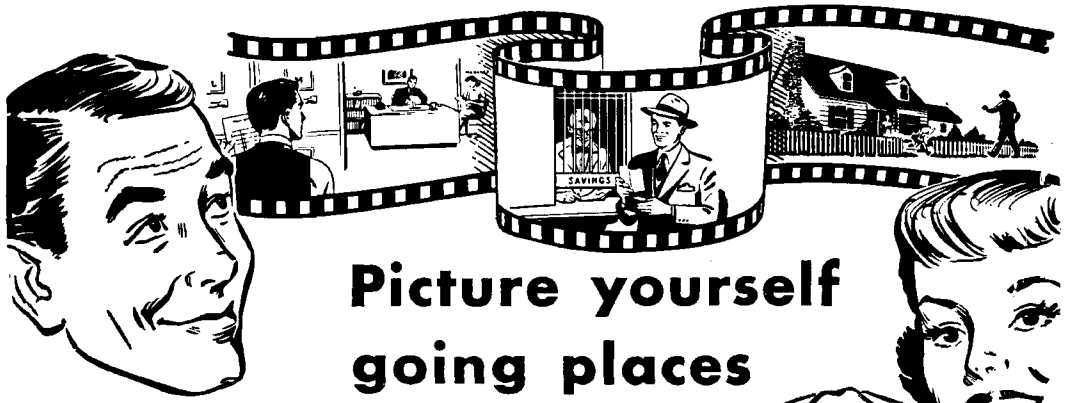

Picture yourself going places

You've done it often. Call it day-dreaming if you like, but you've seen yourself in a bigger job — giving orders and making decisions — driving off in a smart new car — buying your family a fine home.

There's nothing wrong with dreams. But how about making them come true? *You can do it,* if you're willing to try!

Look around you. The men who are going places are the *trained* men. They've learned special skills that bring them better jobs and higher pay. It's the men *without* training whose dreams never come true.

What are you going to do about it? Just wait and wish? If you really *want to succeed,* you can get the training you need by studying at home in your spare time. International Correspondence Schools offer you a course in just about any field you choose, giving you the practical plus the bedrock facts and theory. No skimming or skimping! And you'll be earning while you learn. Students report better jobs and more pay within a few months.

Look over the list of subjects in the coupon below. Pick out the one that interests you most — the one that holds the greatest future for you. Then mark the coupon, and mail it today. *Find out* what I. C. S. can do for you. It costs only a stamp or postcard, but it's the first step if you want to go places!

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